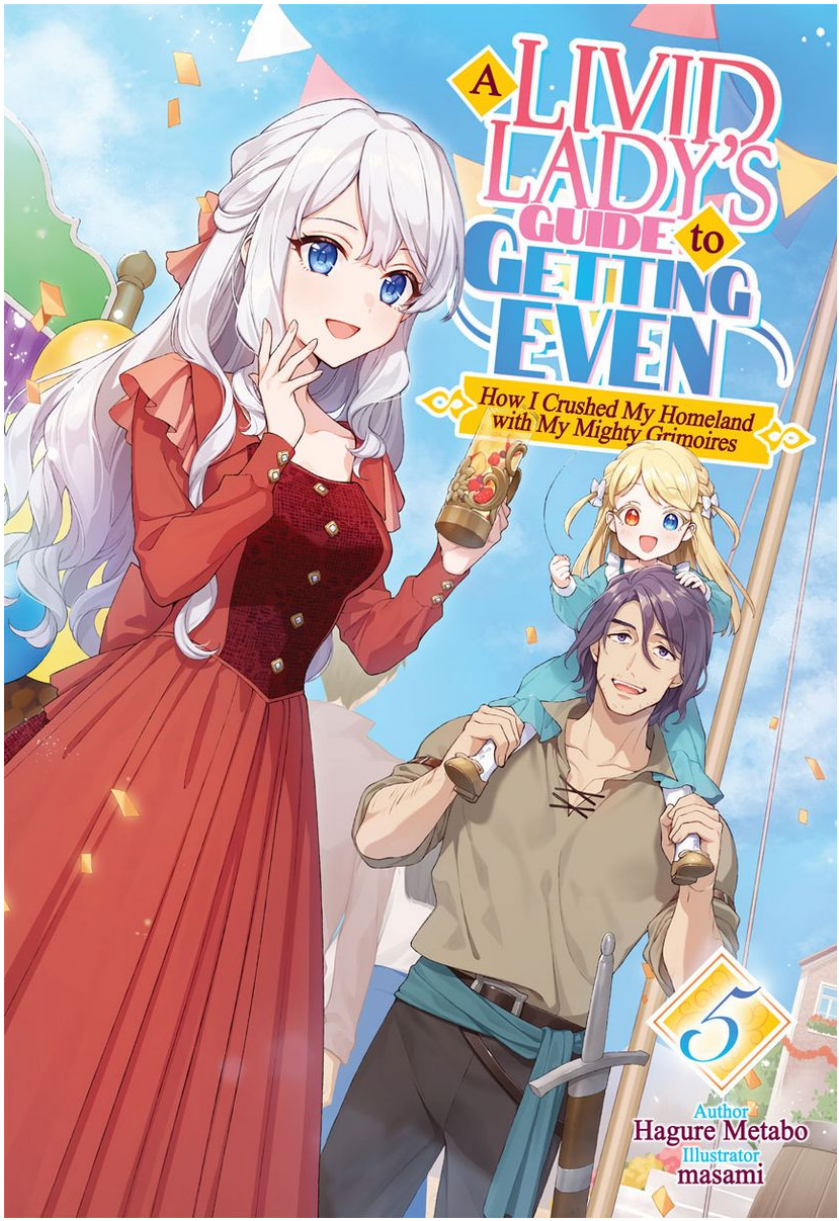
A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN
How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires
5
Author
Hagure Metabo
Illustrator
masami

A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 5 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
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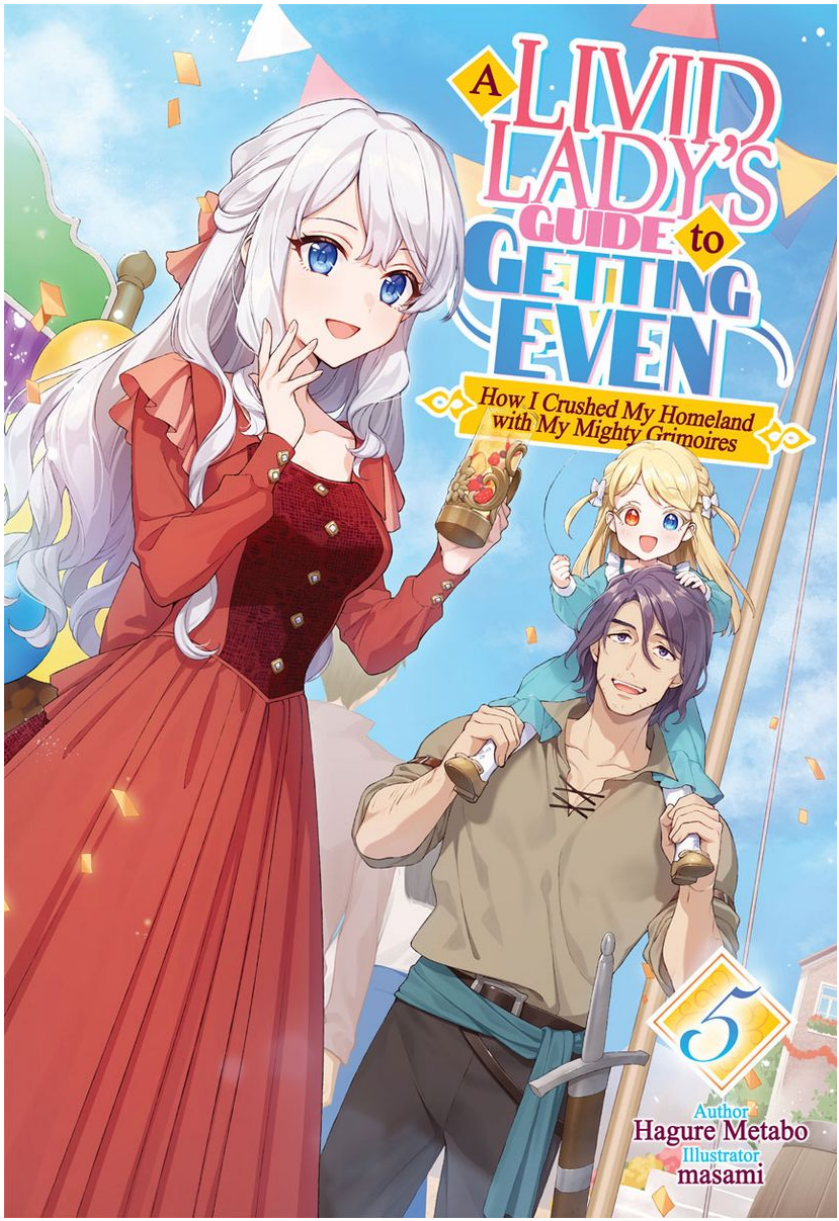
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Prologue

The Yutear Empire was located in the north of the Central Continent. In the capital of this flourishing empire was a rich residential district, where the townhouses of lesser nobles and wealthy merchants stood side by side. I sat at my desk in one of these upscale residences, preparing for the coming festival. For most commoners, this was simply an event to enjoy. For us merchants, it was a crucial business opportunity. Needless to say, I didn't intend to let my firm be outdone.

I heard a knock on the door, which pulled me out of my focus. I said "Come in," and Lunoa entered my office, holding a stack of documents.

"Excuse me, Miss Ellie," she said. "A shipment just arrived from Gana."

"I'll check the goods later," I replied. "You can leave the delivery slip on my desk."

"Here it is."

The village of Gana served as Traitre's production base. Before heading to the United Beast Kingdom, I'd written to them and asked them to send us a very specific shipment.

"The goods we received this time are different than usual, aren't they?" Lunoa asked.

"They are, indeed. I asked them to lower the quality somewhat so we can price this batch cheaper."

"Oh, so we'll commercialize the products under Enfer."

The Enfer Commercial Firm was a brand new company I planned to launch right in time for the festival. Unlike Traitre, which sold high-quality products targeted at nobles, Enfer would deal with less expensive, lower-quality products. They'd be cheap enough for

commoners to be able to purchase them, and in addition to cosmetics, I planned to sell clothes and accessories.

“Up until now, I haven’t sold products targeted at commoners out of consideration for existing firms. But now that roughly sixty percent of the capital’s luxury cosmetics brands are affiliated with me in one way or another, the time has come to move on to wealthy commoners.”

Lunoa put down the stack of documents she’d brought, and I swiftly signed the papers that needed to be returned to the Merchants’ Guild before giving them back to her.

Misha, who was sitting at the desk next to mine, started sorting the rest of the documents.

“But, Miss Ellie,” Misha asked, “Why bother creating a new firm? Wouldn’t it have been much easier to create a new division under Traitre for this new line? You’d pay less in taxes too.”

“Good question,” I said. “Do you know the answer, Lunoa?”

Lunoa remained silent for a few moments, thinking. Eventually, she replied, “Well… I’d say your goal was to protect Traitre’s brand image. Traitre’s clients are mostly nobles, and we even have a membership system in place. If Traitre started catering to commoners with inexpensive products, it would lose its prestige and, by extension, its appeal.”

“That is the main reason, indeed,” I confirmed. “There is no shortage of nobles who care more about the scarcity and prestige of a product than its quality. Purchasing from the same brand as commoners wouldn’t sit well with them.”

“The main reason? Does that mean there is another?”

“The second is risk diversification. As I mentioned previously, Enfer will not only sell cosmetics, but also clothes, accessories, and perhaps other things in the future. Besides, instead of manufacturing them all in-house like we do for Traitre, I intend to stock goods from other companies—imports specifically. Under

these conditions, it will be difficult to prepare for unforeseen trouble. I need to protect Traitre in the event that Enfer goes under."

"So while you'll be in control of both businesses, the two will remain entirely separate entities to prevent joint bankruptcy..." Lunoa said.

"I must confess to one more ulterior motive. Paying more taxes will please the empire. Giving a good impression is a nice bonus, don't you think?" I jested.

Lunoa and Misha laughed.

"Hmm? Isn't the transit fee higher than usual?" Misha suddenly asked, looking puzzled as she stared at one of the documents.

She handed it to me and I quickly read through it. She was right; the transit fee had gone up.

"Good catch, Misha," I said. "Go ask the person in charge of transit to provide an itemized list of expenses. I want to know how much was spent at each stage."

"Understood, miss," she replied, trotting out of the room. She came back soon after with a list of the tolls exacted by each lord whose territory our goods had gone through. According to the document, one territory had dramatically increased its toll compared to before.

"Baron Dirk increased his toll," I noted.

"Baron Dirk, huh?" Lunoa repeated, a bitter expression on her face.

When we'd first traveled to the capital together, we had been attacked by brigands while passing through Baron Dirk's territory. It seemed that the memory of that arrow flying toward her hadn't faded.

"Wait a minute. Isn't he targeting Traitre specifically with this toll hike?" Lunoa asked.

“What do you mean?” Misha said. “I thought lords couldn’t set different tolls for different companies.”

“They can’t do that arbitrarily, but they can set individual tolls based on the type of item transiting through their land, or the size of the firm,” Lunoa explained.

I nodded. “Lunoa is right. As per the laws of the empire, noblemen are allowed to set specific tolls depending on the scale of companies and the products they purvey.”

“Baron Dirk only increased his toll for large companies handling cosmetic products and raw materials used to manufacture cosmetics. Most big firms dealing with cosmetics in Lebrick Magravate are under Traitre. As a result, most of the cosmetics shipped from there to the capital through Dirk Barony are affiliated with Traitre. In other words, he is targeting us,” Lunoa concluded.

“Should we send a letter of protest to the baron?” Misha asked.

“That will prove difficult. While the price he set is high, charging a toll is perfectly within his rights as a feudal lord.”

“Should we send our products through an alternate shipping route, then?”

“Hmm… Avoiding Dirk Barony would force the goods to make too long of a detour. We’d need to run the numbers properly to be entirely certain, but I believe we’re better off paying the baron.”

“I see… I’ll check, just in case. Perhaps there is a cheaper route we can exploit,” Lunoa said.

“Sure, please do that.”

Finding a less expensive route would be difficult—if at all possible, but I didn’t want to discourage Lunoa when she was being so proactive. Even if she couldn’t make it work, this would teach her about opening new trade routes.

“Let’s take a break for now. Misha, could you please make us some tea?”

“Of course, miss,” she answered. She put the documents she’d organized in the drawer of her desk and stood up. There was a water supply in the office, so we were able to brew tea here.

“Once we’re done with these extra procedures, we’ll be back to our normal workflow,” I said. “I don’t expect there’ll be much to do from tomorrow onward, so the two of you may head into town if you’d like. The most restless merchants have already started opening street stalls, and others are having sales.”

“We planned to go with Alice and Lily,” Lunoa told me.

“Lily? Oh, the girl who works for Yuu.”

“Yes.”

Lily was the disciple of one of my friends, Yuu. Nowadays, Lunoa often undertook assignments as an adventurer on her days off, and she’d become a regular at Yuu’s shop, where she frequently bought potions from Lily.

I’d just finished clearing off my desk when Misha approached, holding a tray of teacups. I took one and had a sip. Misha had gotten a lot better at brewing tea. She’d chosen the right water temperature for steeping the tea leaves, and the fragrance of the black tea enchanted my senses. I mostly drank coffee these days, but I still very much enjoyed the occasional cup of tea.

“Speaking of the festival…” Misha started, “What events will be going on?”

“On the first day, the imperial family will parade across the city. Then, they’ll head back to the palace, where His Majesty the Emperor will give a speech from the balcony to open the festivities. Part of the imperial garden will be opened to the public, so the people can witness it. After that, the nobility will busy themselves with parties and ceremonies, while the commoners—and the travelers who come to the empire especially for this occasion—will enjoy the booths and stalls the merchants put up. Similar events, on a smaller scale, of course, will also take place simultaneously in other cities of the empire.”

Travelers from all over the world flocked to the empire for this festival, which took place every five years. I wasn't in the empire the last time it had been held, so I'd yet to see it in person, but the festival was incredibly famous. I expected the capital to be bustling with activity until it ended.

"Come to think of it, I have a feeling they also held festivities in Lord Lebrick's territory..." Lunoa mused.

"I don't really remember it, but that might be because we were traveling so much back then," Misha said.

Considering their age, Lunoa and Misha would have been roughly five years old at the time of the previous festival. It was only natural for them not to remember much about it.

"What are we even celebrating?" Misha added.

"Oh my! You don't know?" I asked, surprised.

"No. I don't think my parents ever mentioned it," she replied.

"I suppose it makes sense," I said. "If I'm not mistaken, catkin tribes originally lived north of the empire. They accepted vassalization fairly quickly, without any wars, when the empire started expanding, but your people weren't originally part of it. This event finds its roots in the festivities that commemorated the founding of the old Yutear Kingdom, so tribes without direct lineage to it or its neighboring regions tend to feel less connected to the celebrations. These days, though, people have started holding the festival all over the empire."

"I see!"

"I didn't know much about it either," Lunoa said. "I only knew that it had to do with the founding of the nation."

Lunoa's understanding of it seemed about right. I figured most people only knew that much.

"All right, girls," I said. We shall leave the work to others for once, and enjoy the festival."

“Yay!”

Chapter 1: Before the Festival

"There you go, Alice," I said, hanging a small leather pouch around her neck. It contained two small silver coins and around ten copper coins.

"Make sure to stay with Lunoa and Misha the entire time, all right?"

"Okay!"

Alice was about to head out with Lunoa and Misha to browse through the stalls and watch street performances. I wished I could go with them, but I had a prior commitment I needed to honor. I eased my worries by reminding myself that we were in the very heart of the empire—the safest place there was. Plus, there were even more guards patrolling than usual because of the festivities. The girls wouldn't be kidnapped again, especially since I'd requested for some of Barl's men to keep an eye on them from afar.

Don't worry, your preparations are flawless, I reassured myself deep down.

"Miss Ellie, the carriage is ready," Mireille told me.

"Thank you."

I watched Alice and the others walk away before heading toward the carriage with Mireille. It was an unassuming, yet high-quality carriage. The materials were as fine as could be, befitting the head of a large firm, but there were no ornaments whatsoever decorating it, which helped me avoid angering nobles who hated to see mere commoners own luxurious things.

Barl was petting the mane of one of the horses, and he turned toward us as we approached.

"Oh, hey, missy. Have the kids gone out already?"

"They have," I answered. "I hope they'll enjoy the festival."

Mireille and I boarded the carriage. Barl closed the door for us before hopping onto the driver's seat and grabbing the reins. He cracked his whip once, and the carriage started moving forward. As we passed through the gate, I immediately noticed that the atmosphere in the streets was different than usual.

"Everyone seems to be elated," Mireille commented.

"They must have been looking forward to the festival," I answered.

"I hope you get to enjoy it too, miss," she told me.

"Me too. I always used to be busy hosting important guests during such celebrations... While there was still much to prepare now as a merchant, I can leave most things to my staff once the festival starts." I paused. "Exploring the festival with Alice sounds fun."

Mireille and I kept chatting as the carriage headed toward the noble district. The person I was going to see today was a member of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council, and the grand master of the Merchants' Guild—Count Albert Guide, the Seer.

"Count Guide got in touch with you first this time, didn't he?" Mireille asked.

"He contacted me on behalf of his son. The count has built tremendous wealth by using the harbor in his territory to control exports and imports. His heir has made it his goal not to stop at international trade, but also to handle the logistics and shipping of goods within the empire."

"So that's why they reached out to you."

"Indeed. On paper, the count's son's idea is excellent, but if he tries to make it a reality without the proper know-how, there is no doubt he'll fail. That is why he proposed a partnership with Enfer. I assume he's mostly trying to accumulate experience before he moves on to bigger things."

I shrugged and continued, "I realize that putting it like that

makes it sound like he just intends to use us, but this partnership would be extremely profitable to us too. A business connection with the count is priceless. Think about it: the Seer himself will be in our debt."

If I played my cards right, this connection could help me expand my business to other continents. I already had a friendly relationship with Count Hammitt, who also owned a port, but due to the geographical position of his territory, he mostly conducted business with other ports on the Central Continent. There were some exchanges with other continents—in fact, I'd already imported aqua crawlers from the Southern Continent through his port—but they were fairly rare. Count Guide, on the other hand, *specialized* in intercontinental trade.

"As you can see, these dealings will play a big role in our future, far beyond immediate profit," I declared.

◆

While Ellie was on her way to Count Guide's townhouse, Alice walked toward the main square, holding hands with Lunoa on one side and Misha on the other. The square was near the noble district, and plenty of lesser nobles, knights, and prosperous merchants had taken up residence in the area. With the festival coming up in a few days, security was tight, and any quarrel—even if it didn't come to blows—was broken up or mediated by guards almost immediately.

Usually, the main square was a place of relaxation for the people of the capital, with a quiet and serene atmosphere. Today, however, a cacophony of merchants' voices advertising their wares filled the air. Countless peddlers and itinerant entertainers had traveled to the capital for the festival. It was risky to plan to arrive on the first day of the festival due to the influx of people, so most of them had come to the city well in advance and used that time to set up their businesses early. It happened without fail every single time the festival was held, and the authorities had long since gotten used to it. They prepared in advance so the merchants' early arrival would not cause chaos.

"The square is packed," Lunoa said.

“It is,” Misha agreed. “Don’t let go of our hands, Miss Alice, okay?”

“I won’t!”

The three girls went straight to the large decorative fountain and waited there. Barely any time had passed before another young girl ran up to them.

“Sorry for the wait!” Lily exclaimed, waving.

“Where should we go first?” Misha asked.

“A lot of entertainers have gathered near the center of the square! How about we check out their shows first, then stroll through the stalls and do some shopping?” Lily suggested.

“That sounds like a good plan,” Lunoa replied.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Alice yelled, grabbing Lunoa and Lily’s hands and dashing forward, pulling them along.

“Miss Alice! No running!” Misha warned, running after them. “You’ll hurt yourself!”

At the very center of the square stood a bronze statue of the first emperor. Around it, wandering minstrels played music while other entertainers showcased their talents.

“They’re a lot better than the people we saw in Kellevan,” Misha commented.

“They are!” Lunoa said. “Oh, look! A monster! Is that man a tamer?”

“Big sisters! Look! Look there!” Alice chirped, pointing.

Misha and Lunoa turned around to follow her gaze and saw a large rainbow in the sky. A juggler in vibrant clothes was in the air, walking on the rainbow itself.

“How is he doing that?” Misha asked.

“Magic?” Alice said.

“Most likely, yes,” Lunoa said. “I assume he’s using some sort of illusion spell to conceal tiny footholds.”

When the juggler finished crossing the rainbow bridge, it shattered into small particles of light and poured down upon the onlookers like glittering, prismatic rain.

“What sophisticated magic! This must be the work of several people teaming up,” Lily said.

After that, the girls watched a tamer with a whip who made a monster jump through hoops of fire, a man who swallowed a sword, a woman who changed clothes again and again in a split second, and many more performances. After a while, they moved away from the center of the square to take a look at the stalls.

“Is there anything you’d like to buy, Miss Alice?” Misha asked.

“I wanna buy a gift for mama!”

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” Misha praised.

“Let’s go see if we can find something,” Lunoa said.

“I think I saw some nice stalls selling miscellaneous goods over there,” Lily said.

As they followed her, they passed many booths selling various kinds of products. To set up shop here, in the main square, vendors had to be approved by the authorities first. They were then grouped with other peddlers who sold similar items, and allocated a space. That way, buyers could find what they were looking for more easily.

The group was meandering along, looking at the goods on sale, when Misha suddenly exclaimed, “Ah!”

“What’s wrong, Misha?”

“Nothing, sorry... I just saw something that caught my attention,” she replied, standing still in front of a stall.

The others approached and saw she was looking at a dagger.

“That’s not a design you see often,” Lily commented.

“This dagger...” Misha whispered.

“That dagger seems to be of pretty good quality,” Lunoa said, after she took a good look at the item that had grabbed Misha’s interest.

“Is that so?” Misha replied.

“I couldn’t analyze it as well as I’d hoped, but the base materials it’s made of are good,” Lunoa said.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me about this dagger?” Misha asked the peddler.

“Hm? Ah, this one? Well, it was excavated from ancient ruins. I got it when I purchased the unsold inventory from a merchant friend of mine, so I don’t really know much more about it.”

“Oh, I see,” Misha said, disappointed.

“The ornaments on it are so peculiar,” Lunoa noted.

“They must be from a monster’s corpse,” Lily said. “I couldn’t say

which type, though."

"The dagger must be valuable since it was found in ruins," Misha suggested.

"I don't think so. It's too neat and undamaged. It's got to be a replica," Lily said.

"I agree. It doesn't look like it could have been found in ruins," Lunoa added.

"So, are you going to buy it or not?" the peddler asked.

"It's your call, Misha," Lunoa said, turning toward her.

"I'm not sure. How much is it?" she asked the vendor.

"Two regular silvers and a small silver."

Lunoa noticed Misha's hesitation, and started negotiating.

"For a replica? It can't possibly be worth more than a regular silver and three small silvers," she said.

"Whoa, I'm gonna have to stop you right there, missy. I can't possibly go that low. I could do two regular silver coins, though."

"How about we meet in the middle, mister? One regular silver coin and four small silvers."

The peddler laughed. "You sure drive a hard bargain, missy! I'll fold for one silver coin and nine small silvers."

"All right," she said, before turning to Misha. "It doesn't look like we'll get a better offer than that. Does that work for you?" Lunoa could tell the peddler wouldn't budge this time.

"Y-Yes. Thank you," Misha said.

"You even know when to quit," the seller said with a smile, impressed by Lunoa's negotiating skills.

He took the money from Misha and handed her the dagger.

Then, the group bid him farewell and continued shopping. Eventually, Alice stopped in front of a stall that sold accessories.

“Have you found something that you like, Miss Alice?” Misha asked.

“Yeah! Which one would suit mama best?”

“You should pick, Alice,” Lunoa said. “Choose the one *you* think would suit her best.”

Alice gazed wide-eyed at the rows of accessories with a serious expression.

“That one!” she eventually exclaimed.

“It’s beautiful,” Misha said.

“I think you picked well,” Lily said. “It truly fits Miss Ellie’s image.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” Lunoa added.

◇

Count Guide’s residence was almost on the edge of the noble district. People of his peerage and position normally lived closer to the imperial palace, but Count Guide himself had decided on this location. As the grand master of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild, he wanted to be closer to the guild’s building.

“So that is Count Guide’s townhouse,” I said.

It was a modern residence built of white stone. After we showed the letter Albert had sent us to the gatekeeper, we were shown inside. The first thing I noticed was the width of the corridors and doors. They were all a little wider than those in most mansions to accommodate the wings of the Guide family, who were a house of dragonewts. Many of their servants were dragonewts too, and I couldn’t help but wonder if they were related to the main family. The maid who guided us through the house, for instance, had a beautiful pair of wings on her back. She led us to a room where

Albert and his son Edward were waiting for us.

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Ellie,” said Edward. He was a young man who appeared to be roughly the same age as me.

Edward smiled and extended his hand to me. I was taken aback for a second and my eyes widened in surprise, but I returned his smile and shook his hand.

According to what I’d heard from Albert, after graduating from the imperial academy, Edward had returned to the family’s estate to study business for a few years. This was his first time conducting negotiations, and from what I understood, his father was only joining us to observe. He would not comment on anything.

I glanced at Albert when Edward wasn’t looking. He gave me a strained smile but said nothing, despite the fact that Edward had broken several social protocols. I imagined Edward was conducting the meeting this way because he knew my true identity, but I was a commoner merchant as far as anyone in the empire was concerned. A noble waiting for a commoner ahead of time was unthinkable. Besides, while Edward would be handling the negotiations, Albert had been the one to formally invite me. Edward and I had never met before, so it wasn’t proper to greet one another before Albert introduced us. That was why I’d smiled and shook his hand without responding verbally.

I turned to Albert and bowed deeply.

“It’s been a while, Miss Ellie,” he said.

“It has indeed, my lord.”

“Have you been well?”

“My business has fared wonderfully, thanks to you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. If you don’t mind, I shall leave today’s talks to my son, Edward.” Albert stood up and put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “As you can see, he’s still young and inexperienced, but there is no need for you to go easy on him.”

Now that Albert had introduced him to me, I could finally speak directly to Edward.

“I’m Ellie Leis, the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“O-Oh, sorry,” he replied, his face paling. “Likewise. I’m Edward Guide.

Our reaction seemed to have clued him in on his mistakes. However, acting so meek in front of a merchant was also a bad move. I had no doubt his father would lecture him after I left.

“As you may have heard,” Edward started, “I am thinking of implementing a comprehensive plan to transport and sell the products sourced by our house. Traitre controls the market for cosmetics, and I believe a business partnership between the two of us could be mutually advantageous. That is why I requested this meeting.”

“I see. Well, first of all, would you be so kind as to show me the plan you’ve drafted for this partnership?”

“Of course, here it is.”

I looked over the document Edward had just handed me. He had dutifully calculated the transportation expenses, administrative fees, storage costs, and more. While he still had much to learn regarding etiquette, Edward seemed to be a competent man.

“In other words, you’d be providing the resources, and we’d be offering you our expertise,” I said, after reading through it all.

“Exactly. I know Traitre uses scarce materials that must be sourced from other continents. A partnership with me would certainly benefit you in that regard too,” Edward said.

“Still, I must admit that something bothers me,” I said. “Once you’re done absorbing our know-how, what incentive will you have to keep working with Traitre?”

“I-I could never betray someone who has done me a favor! Please

take my word for it!”

“I assure you, Lord Edward, that I have faith in your good character and do not think you’d dishonor yourself in such a way. However, you must understand that many depend on my firm to feed their families. I cannot leave their fate to my personal evaluation of your character, even if you’re the son of a respected nobleman of the empire.”

I gave the proposal back to Edward. While he was Count Guide’s heir, Edward did not have a title at the moment. His word did not carry enough weight for me to rely solely on it.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot accept your terms,” I concluded.

“W-Wait!” Edward said, panicking. “How about we sign a magic contract, then?”

“A magic contract only binds the individuals who signed it. If something happens to either of us, Traitre will have no way to protect its interests. I am not willing to take that risk.”

“In that case, in addition to signing a magic contract, I shall offer you the titles for five of our ships.”

“Offer me the titles?”

“Indeed,” Edward confirmed. “I understand that it will take time to let trust grow between us. Hence this proposal: Our house currently operates 153 ships. I will transfer ownership of five of them to you. Since they’ll become your assets, your successor will inherit them when you pass. Naturally, we will compensate you appropriately to keep using these ships.”

“Interesting,” I said.

Edward wrote down the expected fee his firm would pay me to rent each of the ships I would own.

“How much will the maintenance of the ships and personnel cost us?” I asked.

“We will be operating the ships and covering these fees as per usual, so you needn’t worry about any of that. In exchange, we shall sign an additional contract stipulating that these ships may only be rented to us, and will not be used for any other purpose.”

Edward had piqued my interest. We’d both be conceding guarantees until we could fully trust one another. He’d give me five ships, but I wouldn’t be able to use them myself, as he’d retain control over them. To be honest, I didn’t necessarily mind that. This way, I could secure a steady revenue stream without needing to worry about operating the ships.

“That’s not a bad deal,” I said.

“You agree, then?!”

“Ten ships,” I stated.

“Huh?”

“I’ll enter this partnership for ten ships.”

Edward seemed to be at a loss. Just as I expected, he was the type to carefully run the numbers before making any decisions. He could tell from instinct that giving me ten ships would tilt the balance in my favor far too much, and I could see the gears turning in his head, trying to calculate on the spot where the line stood. All these calculations delayed his answer and betrayed his thoughts.

“How about six ships?” he finally offered.

“That isn’t enough,” I replied. “Eight would be the bare minimum.”

“Seven, then? I’m afraid I cannot promise you any more on my own accord.”

“In that case...how about we go back to five ships, but you agree to let me have a say in their cargo, as well as give me 0.05% of the profits you make off of them? In exchange, I’ll rent you the stores I’ve secured for Enfer at 70% of their market value. That way, if you were to withdraw for any reason, you wouldn’t need to deal

with unnecessary real estate assets. On the other hand, if your business grows without any issues, I'll sell them to you."

"So you're proposing to mitigate my risks in exchange, huh?" Edward said. "Fine. However, while I promise to listen to your opinion and take it into account, we will retain the right to make the final decision regarding the ships' cargo. If you allow me to add this clause to the contract, I'll accept your terms."

"I agree," I said. "Would you like me to prepare the magic contract?"

"No need; I shall take care of it. Please excuse me while I go make arrangements."

Edward stood up and left the room. Albert, who'd been sitting quietly in a corner, let out an awkward laugh.

"You sure were merciless," he said.

"Well, *you* told me not to go easy on him, my lord," I replied, with an innocent smile.

I'd made it sound like I was ready to make concessions too, but renting out buildings I already owned was not a sacrifice by any means—in fact, I'd simply secure more revenue. On the other hand, snatching 0.05% of the ships' profits, along with a right to give my opinion on their cargo, was huge.

"So, what did you think of my son?" Albert asked.

"Let me see... First of all, he lacks experience handling commoners as a nobleman. He's bright—that much is clear—but if I may, I suggest he leave the negotiations to someone else. However, his ability to draft plans and manage businesses shines through. The proposal he made to me is quite similar to a novel idea that has emerged on the Northern Continent in recent years. They call it 'shares.'"

"I've heard of it. You're referring to that new practice of allowing outsiders to have a say in business decisions, and paying them dividends in exchange for having them bear part of the operating

costs.”

“Yes. I don’t know if your son heard about it or came up with the idea himself, but being ready to implement such novel and interesting concepts into negotiations is wonderful.”

Albert looked satisfied by my praise. “I’m sure this experience taught him a lot,” he said. “I’m sorry for making you go through this.”

“Oh, please don’t be. I’ve profited quite a lot from these talks.”

After that, Albert and I chatted casually while waiting. Eventually, Edward came back with several parchments.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” he said, handing me a blank magic contract.

“What a fine magic contract,” I said, after I studied the magic circle on it.

“It is of the highest quality,” Edward told me. “I brought out the best we had on hand.”

It was indeed the best—and most powerful—type of magic contract used between merchants. Better ones existed, but they were usually reserved for monumental deals that involved noblemen or royalty—treaties that bound two nations together, for instance.

“Allow me to draw up the contract, then,” he said.

Edward started writing down everything we’d talked about in detail.

“Lord Edward,” I said, stopping him. “I suggest you modify the way you’ve worded this clause. It could be taken differently.”

“U-Understood.”

Magic contracts were a little tricky in that adding too many details wasn’t always the best course of action. The more specifics

one added, the more one risked writing in contradictions or flawed sentences. Sometimes, such things allowed one party to unilaterally disregard their obligations.

While Edward wrote, I sometimes made corrections and instructed him on the best way to handle magic contracts. That was the least I could do—especially since I worded some things in ways that benefited me. Albert's stiff smile was back on his lips, but he didn't interrupt.

"Are we in agreement with the content of this contract?"

"We are, indeed. I don't see any issues with it."

Count Guide's chamberlain brought us a dagger, and Edward and I took turns to prick one of our fingertips and sign the contract with our blood. I wrote Ellie Leis, but that wouldn't matter or change anything.

Once we were done, we both healed the tips of our fingers with a potion the chamberlain had brought alongside the dagger, and we put our hands over our respective signatures. All that was left was to infuse some mana into the contract. As we did so, the letters rose from the page, and after floating in midair for a moment, they were sucked into our bodies.

"The contract is now in effect," Edward said.

He looked relieved as he handed me a copy of the contract. I checked it over once more, and put it away in my bag.

"All right. I shall now excuse myself," I said. "I thank you for this fruitful transaction, my lord."

"You have my thanks too, Miss Ellie."

Edward and I shook hands once more, and I left Count Guide's residence.

◆

“This is strange,” Bulat whispered as he sat in his office in the royal palace of Haldoria. He had just read through the last report his aide had brought him. Since Sieg was in the United Beast Kingdom, his usual work had been divided between several people, including Bulat himself. As he organized the documents he’d finished reading, Bulat looked up at his aide.

“Still no word from Sieg?”

“None at all, Your Majesty,” his aide answered. “We sent a messenger as soon as the prime minister’s periodic reports stopped coming in, but the United Beast Kingdom is still in turmoil in the wake of that stampede right near the capital. His Majesty King Leon hasn’t been able to tell us anything about his whereabouts either.”

“I see. I don’t think Leon would betray me, and Sieg isn’t so weak or careless that he’d get hurt during a stampede. Something else must have happened. Perhaps he ran into trouble and is unable to contact us. Keep looking for him.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Bulat had continued working even as they spoke. He finished drafting a land readjustment plan and handed it to his aide. While most people only thought of Bulat as a warrior king, he did perform his fair share of administrative work. He wasn’t born brilliant, but he’d received a strict education befitting a king and could complete most tasks at a satisfactory level. With both Elizabeth, who’d long helped with his duties, and Sieg, his trusted prime minister, gone, he had no choice but to rise to the occasion. What was truly peculiar, on the other hand, was his son’s utter ineptitude despite having been taught by the best teachers for years. And yet...

“Is this all true?” Bulat asked, pointing at the paper he was reading.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is.”

The document in question was a report on the different tasks Friede had undertaken in recent weeks. After the many blunders

he'd committed, Friede had been forced away from most government affairs for a time. Given the current dire lack of personnel, though, it was unthinkable to allow someone who'd received a good education to idle his days away. Adel had thus decided to give him some tasks of relatively little importance. The surprising thing was that Friede had completed them all flawlessly. Several people had checked his work, and they all agreed: it was perfect. That puzzled Bulat more than any other potential result. After thinking about it for a moment, he reached a happy conclusion.

Bulat let out a relieved sigh. "He's finally started to understand his role."

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"Calling Adel back and removing Friede from his position has opened his eyes. He just needed this push to change his mindset. He always had the ability to deliver results."

"Do you truly think so?"

"I'm sure of it! He could have done it from the start if he'd tried, but he was too lazy and neglected his duties. It's far too late for this sudden change of heart, however. I have already decided to entrust the real authority to Adel. However, I wouldn't be against awarding Friede a suitable position if he continues to prove himself."

The king's aide concealed his exasperation as well as he could and left Bulat's office after gathering some documents.

"This is strange," Adel whispered as she sat in her office in the royal palace of Haldoria.

She had just read through a report on the recent political upheaval in the Nile Kingdom, one of Haldoria's vassals.

"These troubles originally stemmed from the succession war between the first and second princes. The king met his demise without having officially named an heir, and the second prince

wasted no time before murdering his older brother."

"And occupying the royal palace while he was at it," Maoran pointed out. She looked fed up, but the blame wasn't entirely on the Nile Kingdom.

"Part of the responsibility lies with us," Adel said. "When succession conflicts like this one arise, the suzerain must step in and act as a middleman between the two parties in its vassal state. However, we were so preoccupied with the mountain of problems that we currently have that we didn't react in time."

Adel let out a deep, pained sigh. "Instead, the third prince executed the second prince and resolved the coup in less than three days. He also purged the nobles that took his brother's side," Adel stated.

"Will that third prince be the next king, then?"

"Well, the thing is that the third prince renounced his right to the throne in the past. But now that there is no one left except him, the noble council of the Nile Kingdom wrote to us and requested that we restore his right of succession."

"So that's what the letter you read earlier said," Maoran replied. She picked up the letter from Adel's desk and added, "It's addressed to His Highness Prince Friede."

"Handling the vassal states is supposed to be the crown prince's job," Adel answered. "That's why they wrote to him."

"And you're telling me that His Highness wrote this petition to you himself?" Maoran asked.

"He did... Isn't it oddly eerie? The structure, the attachments... Everything is the way it should be. I wouldn't have been surprised if a civil official had given it to me, but... How should I put this? The work isn't groundbreaking in any way, shape or form, but there are no issues with this petition—not even one! Just the thought that my brother wrote it somehow gives me goosebumps."

"Don't you think it's likely that he made one of his subordinates

write it?"

"That would certainly explain it. I suppose Father probably thinks he's finally becoming aware of his position as a member of the royal family, but I can't help but feel like something is off. Not to mention the fact that there's this other issue."

Adel reached for the report she'd received from Roselia and Eiwass. On their way to the imperial capital, they'd discovered the body of Sieg Leiston and had buried it. According to them, Elizabeth was the likely culprit.

"Do you think Lady Elizabeth is behind His Highness's sudden change?" Maoran asked.

"That's not impossible, but I believe another force may be at play."

"Another force? But who?"

"I don't know. I just have a gut feeling."

"I see..." Maoran paused before asking, "What should we do regarding Roselia and Eiwass's report? Do we tell His Majesty?"

"No, definitely not. We'll have a much easier time making our move without a prime minister in place. I feel bad for Sieg, but he will have to remain 'missing' for a while longer."

"Understood. I don't know if we'll get any results, but I'll have people look into His Highness."

Adel nodded, then dropped the documents in her hand onto her desk and stared up at the ceiling. Right at that moment, someone knocked on the door. Adel straightened her posture, then asked Maoran to open the door. A civil official carrying a pile of papers entered and bowed to Adel. He handed her the files and told her what he'd heard in the king's office earlier.

"Seriously? How stupidly fond of his son can he be?" she said with a sigh. Their father's reaction to Friede's strange behavior was even worse than she'd anticipated.

“Isn’t it obvious that an idiot like Friede couldn’t have become an outstanding, responsible prince out of nowhere? Father’s first thought should have been that someone was backing him. And what does he even mean by a ‘suitable position?’ Friede has caused so much strife between us and the empire! The only use he still has is becoming the perfect scapegoat on whom to pin everything that’s wrong with this kingdom before I get rid of him for good.”

“I’m afraid His Majesty the King cannot see things that way. He’s always been very fond of the prince since he shares his affinity for thunder magic…” the king’s aide said.

“As they say, the more foolish the child, the cuter they appear,” Adel said.

“Where does that come from?”

“It’s a saying from the Southern Continent,” Adel told him.

“I see. An interesting expression, indeed.”

“Anyway, that’s all for today. Go back to the king and continue to monitor him for me.”

“As you command, Your Highness,” the king’s aide replied.

The man bowed and left her office. He was a civil official who came from a branch of the royal family who had served as royal aides for generations. Ever since he was a young man, he’d tirelessly advised Bulat with Sieg. However, his allegiance did not lie with Bulat himself—what he truly served was the Kingdom of Haldoria. He had been worried about the nation’s future before Adel invited him to join her cause. Needless to say, he’d accepted. In the shadows, Adel continued to bring capable noblemen and officials to her side as she grew her influence.

Adel’s attention strayed to the pile of documents the civil official had delivered. She brought her hand to her forehead, trying to rub away a wrinkle that had started forming between her eyebrows from too much frowning.

“Friede was a thorn in my side when he didn’t do his work, but I

never thought that him actually doing it would cause me even more trouble."

A gust of wind blew in through the open window. It scattered the papers on Adel's desk and disheveled her hair. Adel massaged her furrowing brow even harder.

◆

A man wearing a luxurious outfit made of brightly colored fabrics stretched his stiff muscles. He watched as a civil official scrambled to gather a pile of documents the wind had just blown away.

"It's so hot today too," he said, looking out the window. A heat haze distorted the scenery with a rippling effect. He wasn't expecting an answer, but the overly serious civil official replied anyway.

"Isn't that always the case? Although the temperature is far more bearable inside thanks to the magic items blocking the heat."

"True. And it just might become even *more* bearable in the near future."

The man took out a piece of vibrant fabric from his pocket and tossed it to the civil official.

"Is that...aqua silk?!"

"Exactly. A firm in the empire succeeded in recreating it. It won't be long before we can easily obtain it in our country too."

"That's wonderful, Your Majesty!"

"Don't call me that just yet. Speaking of which, have we finally received a reply from Haldoria?"

"We have yet to receive an official notice. According to our envoy, the process is underway and we're very likely to receive a positive response. There are many rumors about His Highness the Crown Prince, so I admit I was anxious, but it appears my worries

were unfounded and... Hey! Why are you getting changed in the middle of our conversation?!"

"Well, I'm done with my work, aren't I?"

"How could you possibly be done? There's the funeral service of the first prince to consider, the matter of the succession of the noblemen you purged, and a mountain of other issues that require your attention!"

"La la la! I can't hear you!"

"Wait!"

Having finished changing, the man took out a scroll and untied its cord.

"Any message I should pass on to your sister?" he asked.

"Are you seriously going to use such a precious scroll instead of simply taking a carriage...?" The civil official sighed before answering the man's question. "Yes, absolutely. Tell her to stop being so soft on you."

"Sure," the man replied with a shrug. "Bye, then! Gate!" he said, disappearing into a bright flash of light.

A magic circle drawn on the floor of a small, yet tidy room glowed. Out of thin air, a man with a horn, elf ears, a wolf tail, and other peculiar attributes appeared. A young girl, who'd been sitting in the room quietly reading, lifted her eyes from her book.

"Welcome back, president," she greeted him.

"Hiya, Oulu." Egret erased the magic circle on the floor, then flopped onto the couch of the fine hotel room he had booked in the empire.

"I see you still refuse to fix that casual attitude of yours. My brother will scold you, you know?"

“Speaking of your brother, he had a message for you. He said you should be softer on me.”

“Did you truly think I’d believe that?” Oulu asked, a frustrated sigh emanating from her mouth. The face she made when she was fed up with Egret was exactly the same as her brother’s.

“What’s this?” Egret asked, picking up a letter from a nearby desk.

Oulu answered before he could read the sender’s name. “It’s from Traitre’s chair, Miss Ellie.”

“Oho?” Egret happily grabbed a letter opener and sliced through the envelope. However, his smile fell when he saw the contents.

“Bad news?” Oulu asked. “And here I thought she’d written you a letter to invite you to enjoy the festival with her.”

“It’s not even a letter...” Egret said after a long pause. “It’s an order slip.”

“Ah,” Oulu said, looking at him as though he were the most pitiful man alive.

◇

The sun had already set by the time I made it back home from visiting Count Guide and his son. On the way, I’d stopped by Egret’s hotel to deliver an additional order slip, but, unfortunately, he wasn’t there. It wasn’t too much of an issue, though. Oulu was there, so I’d given the slip to her instead.

Alice and the others had already returned home, and as soon as I stepped into the entrance, my daughter ran up to me. I handed my bag to Mireille and caught her just as she leaped into my arms.

“Mama! Welcome back!”

“Good evening, Alice. Did you have a nice day?”

“Yes! You know what, *you know what*? We saw a mister blow fire

from his mouth!”

“That sounds incredible! I wish I could have seen that with you.”

I carried Alice to the living room while she told me all about their outing. She’d seen street performers in Kellevan too, but as I expected, the performers who’d gathered in the capital for the festival were far more impressive. Apparently, the girls had even seen monster tamers and people who could cast illusion magic.

“And then I bought a gift for you, mama!”

“Oh my! You did?”

Alice handed me a small paper bag. “I picked it myself!” she said.

“Really? May I open it?”

“Yes!”

Inside the bag was a hairpin decorated with a small ornament shaped like an ice crystal. The materials weren’t valuable by any means, but the crystal was finely crafted. It was so well made, in fact, that I suspected it had been forged by a dwarf artisan.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you, Alice.”

I styled my hair with my hands and put on the hairpin.

“How does it look?” I asked Alice.

The little girl beamed. “It looks the best on you!”

I stroked Alice’s hair gently and she giggled.

“My, that hairpin suits you well, Miss Ellie,” said Mireille, who’d just entered the living room alongside Misha and Lunoa. Misha carried a tray with a tea set and cakes.

“Thank you, Mireille. And Lunoa and Misha, thank you for watching over Alice today. Did the two of you have fun as well?”

“We did! The festival has yet to start, but there were already so many stalls.”

“We got to see plenty of unusual goods.”

“That’s great,” I said. I suddenly noticed that the dagger hanging at Misha’s hip wasn’t the same as usual. “Did you purchase a new dagger today, Misha?”

“Ah, yes, I did. Miss Lunoa said it looked like a good item. Apparently, it’s a replica of the daggers that knights used in the days of the Old Kingdom.”

“May I see it?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Misha handed me the dagger in its scabbard. I unsheathed it and inspected it from the point to the hilt.

“This isn’t a replica,” I said. “This is a real magic dagger forged during the time of the Old Kingdom.”

“Huh?” Misha gasped.

“I imagine Lunoa told you that this was a good item based on the materials used to make it. However, her lack of knowledge prevented her from analyzing it entirely.”

“But not even the peddler mentioned it being magic. And we all agreed it didn’t look old enough to be anything but a replica.”

“The magic circle inside it must be damaged,” I surmised. “The weapon’s style is from the late Old Kingdom era. There would have been a preservation spell cast on the dagger, which explains why it

doesn't look like it was excavated from ruins, but it must not be active anymore."

"Is it very valuable?" Misha asked.

"These daggers were mass-produced to be used by knights, and quite a lot have resurfaced over the years, so they're not all that valuable, no. They still have a practical use, so I'd say the average price would be around eight gold coins."

"E-Eight gold coins?!" she blurted out.

"How much did you pay for it?"

"The merchant originally wanted two regular silvers and a small silver, but Miss Lunoa negotiated for me and I got it for one regular and nine small silvers."

"Then you made a great deal," I said, chuckling.

Lunoa was shocked to find out that what she thought was a replica was in fact a real antique, and she joined my laughter at the unexpected fortuitousness.

"But you said it's broken," Alice chimed in. "Can you fix it, mama?"

"Hm. Yes, I can probably fix it. Do you mind if I try, Misha?"

"Please go ahead—if it's not a bother, of course."

I summoned my Grimoire of Mammon and took out an enchantment tool. Alice watched me closely, her eyes sparkling with interest. As I started working on the dagger, I figured now was a good time to teach Lunoa about enchanting items.

"Do you know how to engrave magic circles on objects to turn them into magic items or magic weapons?" I asked.

"So, umm... You have to engrave the magic circle directly onto the material, right?" Lunoa hesitantly replied.

“That is the commonly used method nowadays,” I said. “The advantage is that it doesn’t require much technique aside from the ability to draw a proper magic circle, which makes it easy to efficiently mass-produce magic items. The drawback, however, is that even the smallest damage will disable the enchantment. That’s not necessarily a big issue when it comes to domestic items, but on the battlefield, it can cost one’s life. That is why people sometimes rely on an alternate method.”

I placed the dagger on a piece of fabric that could isolate magic in order to make my work easier. Then, I poured a potion over it. Suddenly, a magic circle rose into the air and floated in front of me.

“This process of enchanting objects is extremely complex to master, and few artisans still practice it,” I explained. “I can attempt to fix this circle, but I couldn’t enchant an item from scratch using this method.”

I scrutinized the floating magic circle and noticed that part of the outside circle was missing.

“Here’s the issue,” I said, pointing to the gap. “Thankfully, the missing part wasn’t a complicated motif from the inside of the circle. I can fix this in no time.”

I used a quill pen made from the feather of a bird monster, along with ink derived from crushed magic stones, to draw a new line and repair the circle before infusing magic into it.

“There you go, all fixed,” I said.

“Thank you, Miss Ellie. Come to think of it, I’ve yet to ask. What enchantment is that?” Misha said.

Oh, right, I realized. I hadn’t explained.

“These weapons used to be called guardian daggers. You can imbue them with one spell at a time. However, it is impossible to pick a unique spell like Lunoa’s Item Analysis, or a spell that can only be used by a specific race, such as Beastification for beastkin or Scale Armor for lizardmen. It’s also impossible to pick a spell

beyond intermediate level. As long as it meets the level requirement, though, the spell's attribute doesn't matter."

I reached out for the dagger in Misha's hands and activated Aqua Heal as I touched the ornament on the handle. It was a low-level water spell that could heal small wounds and detoxify.

"Unsheathe it and pour some mana into that ornament," I told her.

"O-Okay. Like this?" A drop of water radiating blue light emerged from the tip of the blade.

"You can activate the spell by pouring mana into the ornament like so," I explained. "Once you use the spell, it'll disappear, so be careful about that. Guardian daggers were created to be used by knights who lacked magical abilities. Unleashing the spell within the dagger only requires a tiny bit of mana, so practically anyone can do it. However, you do need to cast the spell properly to imbue it into the dagger."

Lunoa and Alice began playing around, taking turns storing simple spells in the dagger and unleashing them. As I watched them, Misha turned to me.

"Miss Ellie," she said, "Actually I... I meant to ask you something..."

"A request from you? How rare. What is it, Misha?"

"I'd like to participate in this." She handed me a piece of rough paper. It was an advertisement for an event.

"A martial arts tournament?"

"Yes... I was thinking I'd like to see what I can do, and test myself..."

"I'm not against you registering, but this tournament is popular. Powerful adventurers and mercenaries will take part because nobles keep an eye on it to scout new knights or members of their personal guards. Even current knights of the empire often compete. If you

don't mind me being blunt, I don't believe you're at the level necessary for a tournament like this one just yet."

"I'm aware of that fact. That's why instead of participating in the main tournament, I want to try this one: the pair tournament."

"The pair tournament?" I repeated, unfamiliar with such an event. I took a better look at the paper and noticed a small box in a corner mentioning a two-versus-two tournament.

"I don't believe I've ever heard of this one," I said.

"From what I've heard, this will be the first edition," Mireille said. "It will serve as a sort of opening act to the main tournament. Most of the truly strong fighters will want to show off their individual skills, so they'll only fight in the main tournament. In other words, the level of this one will likely be much lower."

Apparently, Mireille already knew about this pair-based competition.

"Why would they bother adding a new tournament now? Especially one with a lower level?" I wondered out loud.

"They say they wish to highlight cooperation, not only technique and strength," Mireille answered. "Or at least, that's the public reasoning. I suspect the true reason lies here." She pointed at a line on the paper.

"'Sponsor: Hokins Financial...'" I read. "I see, the Chief is involved."

"Up through the last festival, the empire itself organized and sponsored the tournament. But it appears that now Darc Hokins has taken over," said Mireille. "From what I know, the entry fees and ticket sales barely used to cover the costs of running the event. While the tournament allowed the government to look for strong fighters, it wasn't very cost-effective. Now that a private business is in charge, however, we can expect to see gambling flourish."

"And with a bookmaker running the event, it makes sense to maximize the number of fights," I concluded. "All the more

opportunities for people to gamble and fill the Chief's pockets. Anyhow, under these conditions, I don't see any reason to discourage you from participating, Misha. But who will you team up with?"

"Me. I'll fight with her."

"You too, Lunoa?"

"Yes. I've been fighting monsters as an adventurer on my days off, and I want to see how far I can go."

"Well, this is a good chance for you to accumulate experience fighting people instead of monsters. All right, I'll allow it. Just promise me one thing: Be careful not to injure yourselves too badly."

"Yes, Miss Ellie!" they exclaimed in unison.

◇

"Hi, it's been a while."

The man who'd just spoken sank down onto the sofa in my drawing room. Behind him were his twin bodyguards from the Southern Kingdom. My guest was one of the members of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council and the man who ruled over the underworld—Darc Hokins.

"Far too long, indeed. What can I do for you today?"

"I wanted to have a chat with you," he started, "about the martial arts tournament." Darc took out a cigarette, but before lighting it he appeared to change his mind and put it back into his pocket.

"It will likely be pretty hot on the day of the tournament," he continued. "So I thought of selling refreshing drinks."

"A most natural idea for a merchant," I replied. "But I'm afraid I don't see how that thought led you to me."

“Oh, you know, I was thinking I could get you to make some ice for me.”

Ice? I could indeed create a large quantity of ice with my magic, but Darc could achieve the same result by hiring several ice mages, so why me? In the midst of my confusion, Darc started grinning.

“Obviously, I hired some ice mages, but I have another very important job for most of them—making sure the temperature remains cool enough around my VIPs. That means I likely won’t have enough ice to serve regular clients.”

“You came to me for *that*?”

“I had a feeling you’d accept my request.”

“And why are you so confident, may I ask?”

“Hey, young misses,” Darc called out, looking at Lunoa and Misha, who were standing behind me. “I hear you’re participating in my pair tournament.”

“Y-Y-Yes,” Lunoa stammered.

“We are,” Misha confirmed.

“In that case, you’re most definitely coming too, aren’t you?” Darc asked me.

“That is likely, indeed,” I answered.

“And you’ll be bringing your little brat along, correct?”

“Alice? She’s been looking forward to it, so yes.”

“Perfect. If you take on the job, I’ll reserve a box for your personal use during the tournament.”

“A box?” I repeated.

Boxes were usually reserved by nobles. They were entirely separated from the regular seating area, and they had comfortable

seats and roofs to protect their occupants from the sun. All in all, they made attending events held in arenas, theaters, and other such venues far more pleasant.

“I recently sent an inquiry and was told the boxes were sold out,” I said.

“I’m the organizer,” Darc said. “As you can imagine, I kept a few empty, just in case. I’ll give you one of those.”

“I see…”

Frankly, making ice wouldn’t be all that tiring for me. If doing so meant I could provide Alice with a good viewing experience, it was worth it.

“All right,” I said. “I shall accept your offer.”

“Great. I’ll send one of my subordinates to you tomorrow to explain the details.”

I felt as though Darc had me in the palm of his hand, and I didn’t quite appreciate that, but I nodded anyway.

“Speaking of which,” I started, “there will likely be quite a bit of waiting time in between the matches, right?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, I suppose so.”

“How about hiring singers, minstrels, and the like to perform and fill the gaps, then?”

Darc hummed in thought and his smile broadened. He’d understood my point.

“Keep everyone’s eyes on the show even during breaks so they stay in their seats and purchase *more* drinks and food from me, huh?”

“Sounds more profitable than just selling during the matches, right?”

“That’s a great idea,” Darc agreed. He turned to one of his bodyguards and told them, “Go make arrangements for that!”

I smiled at him. “I’m fine with three percent.”

“What?”

“Three percent of your profit. That’s the price of that idea.”

“I bet you’ve been told many times that you’re an incredibly sore loser.”

“Never,” I shot back. And it was true.

◆

The space within the imperial palace allocated to the Haldorian delegation was large enough for every member to have a private chamber, and it also included offices, conference rooms, a private courtyard, and a small reception hall. In the days that preceded the festival, the delegation’s schedule was packed with meetings and formal talks with the imperial government. Before they tackled these responsibilities, the leader and vice-leader of the delegation, Eiwass and Roselia, had gathered the key members for one last meeting in order to assign tasks.

“Lord Lyman, you will meet with the minister of foreign affairs, Lord Dorham. As for you, Vice-minister Haizen, you shall go observe the Citizens’ Assembly’s reunion,” said Roselia, who was chairing the meeting.

“Understood.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“After our luncheon with Prince Okyst, Lord Eiwass and I will meet with the minister of war, Lord Tiggar, so we can discuss ending the conflict between our two nations. I doubt we’ll resolve the issue entirely, but it appears everyone desires an extension of the armistice, so there is no cause for worry at this juncture.”

The members of the delegation nodded as Roselia spoke. They’d

all been handpicked by Adel and were already on her side. Needless to say, Adel had chosen competent people who were in favor of a lasting peace and did not loathe the empire.

“We will all be very busy until the celebrations start, but I urge you to do your best in the coming days. Thank you,” Roselia concluded.

Once the festival commenced, the emperor and the important nobles would have other obligations. For that reason, all of the delegation’s commitments had to be crammed into the short period of time before the festival.

Once the other members of the delegation had all exited the room, Eiwass spoke up.

“Lady Roselia, I have a request for you.”

“What?! My schedule is beyond packed. You know that, don’t you?”

The kingdom was known to be very conservative, and a young woman like Roselia being appointed vice-leader of the delegation had naturally attracted a lot of attention. As a result, in addition to her meetings with the government officials of the empire, Roselia had received countless invitations from noble ladies to attend tea parties and other gatherings.

Roselia did not enjoy being a socialite in the slightest, but before they’d departed Adel had asked her to accept as many of these invitations as possible. She wanted Roselia to help undo the current image of the kingdom: a male-dominated, human-supremacist nation with outdated values. For that same reason, Adel had made sure that the delegation itself was diverse and included people of many different races. Suffice it to say, Roselia barely had even a moment to breathe until the festival.

“Whatever this is about, can you not do it yourself?” Roselia asked.

Eiwass wasn’t as busy as she was. As the leader of the delegation,

his schedule had to remain light enough for him to be able to react to emergencies—Eiwass himself had insisted on it. Roselia wasn't happy with that outcome, but she understood his reasoning and had accepted it.

"I'm afraid not," Eiwass said. "You're the only one I can ask. Besides, I need you *during* the festival, not before. So it shouldn't affect your schedule in any way." Eiwass took out a neatly folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Roselia.

"What is this?" Roselia asked as she opened it.

"I want you to take part," Eiwass stated once she'd finished reading.

"What?! Why must I do that?!"

"According to the intelligence I've gathered, Elizabeth will make an appearance there."

"Elizabeth?!"

"As you know, my attempt to talk to her failed. I want you to take this chance to approach her yourself," Eiwass said, his expression unusually serious.

Roselia couldn't hide her displeasure, but she knew she had to accept.

"All right, I understand," she replied.

◇

On the following day, I entered my drawing room once again, this time to see a different guest. Egret was lounging leisurely on the sofa, sipping a cup of black tea.

"I'm sorry for the wait," I told him.

"No, no, please don't apologize. I got to enjoy this fine tea, so I wasn't bored in the slightest."

Egret wasn't here to visit me as a friend. He'd come to personally deliver the products I'd ordered from the Birch Commercial Firm.

"So, where are the goods?"

"Right here," Egret replied, taking out three rolled-up parchments tied with leather straps.

"I placed an order because you said you might be able to procure some for me, but I definitely did not expect three," I said.

"I'm sorry, I know the order slip said five, but I couldn't get my hands on that many at once. You'll have to wait a bit for the last two."

"That's more than enough," I replied. I untied the leather straps and examined the parchments. "They're genuine Gate scrolls," I continued. "Here is the money."

I put down two small bags brimming with gold coins on the table in front of Egret. Gate scrolls were incredibly scarce, so they were naturally very expensive. Still, they were well worth the money. One of these could get you out of a dangerous situation in the blink of an eye, which made them a very reassuring item to own. In fact, I was thinking of having Alice hold on to one of them, just in case. While I pondered what to do with these three scrolls, Egret finished counting the coins.

"All good," he said. "Oh, and Oulu will deliver the goods you requested with that additional order slip at a later date."

"Those are for my firm, so if she could get in touch directly with the person in charge of accepting deliveries, that would be perfect," I said.

"Sure thing."

The additional order was for cactuses from the Nile Kingdom. I'd heard that Egret was having a shipment come in from his homeland, so I'd asked for them to be added in at the last minute. These cactuses, which only grew in the Nile Kingdom, had wonderful properties and could be used as an ingredient in potions

and cosmetics. I was looking forward to having my research team take a look at them.

After the conclusion of our business talks, the topic shifted to the festival. Apparently, Egret would be going back to his home country for a while after the celebrations.

“Oh, right, I meant to ask,” Egret said. “Would you like to walk around the festival with me?”

“Let me see... I could make time for it on the second day of the festival, after the pair tournament.”

“It’s settled, then! Speaking of which, why the pair tournament and not the main one?”

“Misha and Lunoa will be fighting in that one,” I replied. “Well, if they get through the qualifiers, that is.”

“Oh, interesting,” Egret said. He reached for the teapot and poured himself another cup.

Egret seemed to want to take advantage of the festival to make contact with as many peddlers as possible. Since his base of operations was not located in the capital, building connections with vendors who traveled a lot made more sense than trying to get close to the nobles and merchants who conducted business solely in the capital.

“By the way, what will you do with Alice during the tournament? Won’t the crowd be too much for her?”

“I made a deal with the organizer, Mr. Hokins. I got a private box out of it, so she should be fine.”

Alice would be able to sit comfortably, protected from the harsh rays of the sun. I’d had to accept Hokins’s conditions, but getting a box in exchange—which was incredibly expensive and oftentimes reserved for nobles—had been a big plus.

“I see someone splurged,” Egret joked.

“Let’s say that,” I replied. I flashed him an awkward smile before gulping down some tea.

◇

The first day of the festival finally rolled around. It was still only the morning, but the entire city was already buzzing with excitement. The dazzling carriages that made up the imperial procession paraded along the main avenue, escorted by the elite knights of the imperial guard. Today, the gate that led to the noble district was open, and commoners had been allowed in to watch the procession, though they were restricted to a designated area. We’d just arrived to take a look as well, though we stood in an area reserved for lower nobles and commoners with special permission.

“Look! The horsies are wearing armor!” Alice exclaimed excitedly.

“Oops, careful, little missy! You’re gonna fall!” warned Barl, who was carrying her on his shoulders so she could see better.

The little girl couldn’t stop wiggling around, pointing at the knights in full armor and their trusty steeds. Lunoa and Misha weren’t with us, as they wanted to work on their coordination before the qualifiers for the pair tournament. I stopped next to Barl and looked where Alice was gesturing.

“It is quite the sight, indeed,” I commented.

The knights in polished armor marched in perfect unison, their capes fluttering in the wind.

“Oh? You think so too, missy?” Barl asked.

“I do. It feels novel, seeing it all from the viewpoint of the citizens. I used to be on the other side, waving my hand from inside the carriage. It may not look like much, but smiling and waving for hours is quite tiresome.”

“Such hardship,” Barl teased. “Look, here comes the star of the show.”

Just as Barl had said, a noticeably more opulent carriage was approaching. The knights escorting that particular coach were not clad in lavish ceremonial armor, like the others, but in proper battle gear. There was no mistaking it—this was the carriage of the ruler of the Yutear Empire: Godwin Yutear.

"As expected, he has the cream of the crop around him," I said.

The imperial carriage had no roof. In fact, the vehicle was closer to being a chariot than a real carriage. Godwin stood there in all his majesty, hand raised to salute his people. My eyes, however, were not drawn to Godwin himself, but to the knight riding as close to the carriage as he possibly could. Barl had noticed him too, and his eyes were glued onto the knight, analyzing his demeanor and his every motion.

"So that's the best knight in the empire," Barl said. "The grand master of the Imperial Knights, Mathias Rhodostos, the Imperial Blade."

"In the flesh. On the battlefield, Lord Rhodostos was on par with Bulat, the God of Thunder. The emperor himself bestowed his nickname of the Imperial Blade. He's the empire's greatest hero. So tell me, Barl, could you beat him?"

"No way. The best I could do is slow him down. And that's assuming I risk my life doing it. I can't see myself winning against him. If he were an adventurer he'd be Rank S—a monster beyond compare."

At his best, Barl was probably as strong as the most powerful Rank A adventurers—around Yuu or Elsa's level, I expected. And yet, he'd barely be able to slow that man down.

"Barl, in your eyes, how strong am I?" I asked.

"Lemme think... Probably somewhere in the middle of Rank A. Your Divine Artifact has a wide range of uses, and you probably still have a few trump cards that not even I know about, but you're no true fighter. I hate to break it to you, but I sure hope you weren't thinking of fighting Bulat head-on."

“I wasn’t.”

A Rank S...

Such individuals far transcended the realm of ordinary people and were said to be able to face entire armies alone. At the moment, there were only three Rank S adventurers: Amadeus Schikaneder, the Magic Flute, Koujirou Sasaki, the Blade God, and Flanriet Mather, the Army of One. In addition to them, there were four people who were not adventurers but were said to be on the same level. Among them were Mathias and Bulat. I had no intention of fighting Mathias, but Bulat was one of the targets of my revenge. I knew full well that Barl was right. I had no chance of winning if I fought him directly. To improve my odds, I’d need to make thorough preparations...

“Mama, what are you two talking about?”

“Ah, don’t worry about it, Alice. It’s nothing.”

Alice’s voice pulled me out of my rumination, and I refocused my attention on the parade.

◆

As soon as the parade ended, Godwin rushed up the stairs to the palace. The festival was a relaxing event for the people, but for the nobles—or worse, for the emperor—both the celebration itself and the days that preceded it were incredibly packed with duties. Every minute mattered.

"Your Majesty! Your change of clothes is ready!"

"I'm coming."

Five waiting maids scrambled to help the emperor change as quickly as possible. During the parade, the emperor had to wear clothes extravagant enough for everyone to catch his brilliance even from afar. For his speech, however, he'd wear a simpler, more dignified outfit. Godwin himself had no fashion sense and was terrible at picking the right clothes for the right occasion, so he left all such decisions to his head waiting maid.

The head waiting maid was in the middle of a fierce argument with the tailor over a minor—yet apparently crucial—detail. Needless to say, Godwin kept his mouth shut. He silently waited for the two to come to an agreement as the rest of the maids dressed him, feeling as though he had become a human dress form. Thankfully, the argument seemed to have been worth having, as when he finally found himself entirely dressed, even he was impressed by the splendor of his garments.

Fully costumed and ready, Godwin jogged briskly behind his knights until they reached the balcony. The part of the imperial garden that had been opened for the festival had citizens squeezed into every available inch, and Godwin's stomach started aching at the sight. He'd spoken to the people many times over the years, but the stress still got to him every time.

"If you please, Your Majesty."

"Yes," Godwin replied quietly.

He took a few seconds to steady his breath so his people wouldn't notice he'd been running. Then, he stepped forward,

appearing calm and composed to the eager crowd. Excluding nobles, even those who lived in the capital seldom saw the emperor. Nevertheless, Godwin was very popular among commoners because he governed virtuously. The commoners who'd gathered in the imperial garden all felt blessed to have a chance to see him in person.

"My dear subjects," the emperor started, "I'm overjoyed to welcome all of you to another festival. The recent peace with our neighbor Haldoria shall allow us to appreciate new cultural treasures in these festive times. Our beautiful empire has always been one to accept diverse cultures and diverse people. You, my dear people, have built it that way, and I, as your sovereign, could not be prouder. Only those who remain flexible and accept the changes that come with progress may know true, everlasting prosperity. The culture of this proud empire *you* have built makes this possible. My dear subjects, join hands with your neighbors and march proudly toward glory!"

A thunderous round of applause and the cheers of the citizenry echoed as the emperor left the balcony. Following his address, several government officials would make speeches about upcoming political decisions, but Godwin had so much to do that he couldn't stay.

"A wonderful speech, Your Majesty," the chamberlain praised. "We shall prepare a drink for you, so please take a short break before your next commitment."

"Thank you," Godwin said.

The chamberlain opened a door to a room where Godwin's son, Okyst, was already taking a rest. Okyst had been greeting nobles all morning. A servant brought a drink to the emperor and swiftly exited the room, leaving the father and son alone.

"Good work, father."

"You too. How are Melina and Ilpha?"

"Mother is entertaining the foreign ambassadors, and my sister is

at a tea party with the daughters of the most important nobles."

"I see," Godwin answered. "I can't begin to tell you how nervous this address makes me every single time."

"I think you picked the right words," Okyst replied. "The speech was full of hope for the future. I could even hear the clapping all the way in here."

"But I feel like I say the same thing every time. In truth, I *did* say the same thing as last time, only worded differently. What if rumors start spreading that the emperor cannot make a substantial speech to save his life?"

"Stop being so negative, father. And please, make sure to *never* show this side of you to anyone else."

"I-I know... It's just...I'm really not the man everyone makes me out to be."

"'Fierce toward his enemies yet tender with his people, the wise emperor who tirelessly leads the Yutear Empire,' huh?"

"Yes, that. I'm none of that! The best I could do was to protect what my predecessors left me. I'm just a mediocre man. *You* will deserve the title of wise emperor, Okyst, but I certainly don't."

The hectic schedule that surrounded the festival had thrown the emperor into a spiral of negativity.

"I know!" Godwin continued. "I should just abdicate and pass the throne to you alrea—"

"Please don't say such drastic things on a whim, father," Okyst said, cutting him off. "There are established traditions we must follow."

Godwin was sinking deeper and deeper into the depths of anxiety when someone knocked on the door. In a split second, his expression returned to that of a dignified, solemn emperor.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it is

time."

"All right. How is the situation?" Godwin asked.

"There are no problems to report, Your Majesty. They are waiting for you."

"Good," Godwin said. He turned to his son. "Remain courteous and hospitable, but do *not* lower your guard."

"Understood," Okyst replied.

Godwin and Okyst ended their break and went to meet their guests. Finally, just one doorway separated them from the envoys of the country with which the empire had long been at odds. While the two nations had signed an armistice some years ago, everyone was aware that any spark could reignite the war.

"I'm sorry for the wait. I am Godwin Yutear, emperor of the Yutear Empire."

"And I am Okyst Yutear, crown prince of the Yutear Empire."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am the leader of the Haldorian delegation, appointed by Her Highness the first princess, Adel Haldoria. My name is Eiwass Leiston."

"I serve as the vice-leader of the delegation. I'm Roselia Fadgal."

The two bowed. Godwin waited for the shortest acceptable amount of time before gesturing for them to lift their heads and take a seat. Doing so allowed him to be courteous toward his Haldorian guests while ensuring that they showed him proper respect so the empire would not appear submissive.

"Let us start, then," Godwin said. "I have set aside time at your request, so tell me, what can I do for you today?"

"First of all, allow me to thank you for making time for us so graciously during such a busy event," Eiwass said. "I have prepared prized Haldorian wine and jewels for you and your family. They shall be delivered shortly."

“I look forward to it, Lord Eiwass,” Okyst said. “However, as you certainly know, His Majesty and I have much to attend to at this time. If you solely wish to offer your greetings, I believe reconvening at a later date would be preferable.”

“I’m terribly sorry for the misunderstanding, Prince Okyst,” Eiwass said. “I do have a tendency to lose myself in preambles and niceties. Just the other day, my sister kindly advised me to be more concise.”

Cold sweat ran down Godwin’s back at Eiwass’s words, but his face remained perfectly expressionless.

“Your sister is Lady Elizabeth Leiston, correct? I’ve exchanged words with her on a few occasions,” Godwin said.

“A bright woman,” Okyst said. “She was engaged to your crown prince if I remember correctly. But isn’t she currently wanted for treason? Do you still keep in contact with her despite these charges, Lord Eiwass?”

“This is all a disgraceful affair,” Eiwass replied, “but the accusations against my dear sister were all false. Her name has already been removed from the wanted list. This was the work of a malicious individual hoping to destabilize our great nation. But fear not, we have apprehended the criminal already.”

“Oh my, is that so? You must have felt a weight lifted off your chest once the hateful accusations against your sister were cleared,” Godwin said.

“I feel much lighter indeed, Your Majesty.” The two men smiled at each other for a moment before Eiwass continued, “Although I learned of something that came as quite the surprise. During all this time, my sister has taken refuge in this very empire.”

“Is that so? This is the first I’m hearing of it,” Okyst said.

“Truly? Even though she operates a firm here and has become so famous under her new name, Ellie Leis, that she received a Special License?”

“Ellie Leis, you say? Do you know who that is, Okyst?” Godwin asked.

“I do remember reading that name in the reports of the Merchants’ Guild Council. But I never would have dreamed that merchant was Lady Elizabeth,” Okyst said.

“Is that so?” Eiwass asked.

“Yes. I can’t begin to tell you how surprised I am,” Okyst replied. “I certainly wonder how and when she arrived in the empire.”

“I see. But you do recognize that Elizabeth is in the empire at this time.”

“Well, I couldn’t say,” Okyst stated. “I’ve never seen anything that confirms Ellie Leis is indeed Lady Elizabeth Leiston as you surmise. What I can tell you, however, is that a merchant who calls herself Ellie Leis does indeed live in the empire.”

“If I were to prove that Ellie Leis *is* Elizabeth Leiston, would you return my sister to the kingdom?”

“Now, that is another situation entirely, Lord Eiwass. The empire welcomes immigrants. To accommodate races and tribes with different cultures, we always approve of people changing their names when they become citizens of the empire, if they wish to do so. Even if you are right and Ellie Leis is indeed Elizabeth Leiston, if she filled out the necessary paperwork and was approved, she is now one of my father’s—or rather, one of the Yutear emperor’s—subjects. She shall receive imperial protection, like any other citizen of this empire. We would never hand our people over to another nation,” Okyst declared, frowning at Eiwass.

Despite the prince’s reaction, Eiwass’s smile did not falter. “I see. Do forgive me for my bold request,” he said.

“If you wish to bring your sister home, talk to her and convince her to come with you,” Godwin said. “The empire welcomes people but has never stopped anyone from leaving.”

“Truth be told, I failed to do so just the other day,” Eiwass

admitted. “I thought perhaps you might be of assistance, but alas. I do hope you understand that this is all motivated by the concerns any brother would have for his younger sister.”

Okyst could not discern Eiwass’s intentions, but his first impression of him was that he was an incredibly intelligent, yet strangely eerie man.

During their entire interaction, Roselia stood silently next to Eiwass, trying her best to keep a neutral smile plastered on her face. It was hard to keep a straight face as she watched Eiwass pretend to be a concerned older brother motivated only by his love for his dear sister, acting as though his request had nothing to do with Haldoria’s interests.

Once the discussion of Elizabeth concluded, Godwin, who had other responsibilities, quickly left. Eiwass and Roselia remained in Okyst’s company for a while longer. They had a friendly chat—on the surface, at least—as Eiwass negotiated a few matters and conveyed Adel’s best regards to Okyst. Roselia did little more than throw in a few polite words here and there, leaving it all to Eiwass. Eventually, the prince entrusted them with a letter for Adel as a gesture of friendship and left the room.

As soon as she and Eiwass were alone together, Roselia exclaimed, “What were you thinking, Lord Eiwass?!”

“Whatever do you mean?” he answered, his tone as nonchalant as usual.

“Those things you said about Elizabeth! That was *not* part of the plan! And why did you provoke the emperor and the prince so much? What would you have done if it had escalated into a diplomatic issue?!”

“They don’t want to turn this into a diplomatic crisis either,” Eiwass replied. “Pretending they didn’t know a thing was all fine and dandy, but that doesn’t change the fact that they sheltered a high-profile wanted criminal. That’s why they couldn’t say anything even after I made such a grand show of looking for my dear younger sister.”

While Eiwass's approach to negotiations was like happily crossing a dangerous bridge with a smile on his face, Roselia, on the other hand, looked exhausted.

She sighed. "I'm starting to understand why Elizabeth won't come back."

Ever since she had heard Adel's plans, Roselia had been convinced that Elizabeth would return once Adel successfully ousted Friede and took his place. She wasn't so sure anymore, though. This discussion reminded her of what Eiwass had told her about his recent meeting with Elizabeth in the imperial capital.

◆

"So, why are you here, brother?"

"Don't be so cold. I'm obviously here because I'm worried about my adorable little sister."

"Surely you jest. Did King Bulat send you? Or the prime minister?"

Eiwass laughed. "Do you truly believe I'd have come simply because they asked?"

"No," Elizabeth replied. "You never do anything unless it's in your own self-interest."

"You know me too well," Eiwass replied with a chuckle. "I'd never move a finger to undo the messes caused by foolish old men. Besides, don't you know better than anyone that it couldn't possibly have been at father's request?"

"What do you mea—"

Before Elizabeth could finish her sentence, Eiwass took out a leather bag and opened it, showing her its contents. Inside was the head of Sieg Leiston—her father, and the very man she'd killed in the United Beast Kingdom.

Elizabeth looked into Sieg's lifeless eyes. "Where did you find

that?"

"Well, you see, on my way to the empire I was approached by some peasants. They told me the body of a nobleman had washed up along the river. I went to have a look and lo and behold, there he was: our father. He'd been missing ever since that stampede incident in the United Beast Kingdom, so as you can imagine, I was very worried."

Elizabeth gave him a dubious look, but Eiwass continued his story, unperturbed, "My first thought was that he must have been killed by a monster, but then I noticed that he'd lost an arm. The cut was peculiar. It was clean, *too* clean, like it'd been sliced by an incredibly sharp blade—a blade like your beloved Flügel, for instance. And you wouldn't believe what I found embedded deep in his chest," Eiwass continued. "It was Nibelheim, the icy blade of judgment, a spell invented by a certain genius I know."

"I have no intention of hiding it," Elizabeth said. "I killed Sieg Leiston. Now the question is: What do you want to do about it? Did you think you could scare me with his head?"

"Scare you? No way. I figured you might want to confirm that you did the job properly. I brought the head because I thought it would please you."

"I see. And? What is your objective, brother?"

"Still so cold... And to think I made sure no information about you reached the kingdom. Don't you think you should thank your kind brother for protecting you all this time?"

"I finally understand. I spent so long wondering why it seemed like no one in Haldoria had noticed anything even though I stood out so much, especially after the Sarjan conflict. So you were the one intercepting the information... I don't buy that you did it out of concern for me, however. You thought I could be useful to you, so you made sure the kingdom wouldn't get to me first."

Eiwass shrugged, and the gentle, meek atmosphere that surrounded him disappeared in the blink of an eye. As Friede's

fiancée, Elizabeth had spent most of her time in the royal capital. Eiwass, on the other hand, had remained in the Leiston Duchy to learn how to manage it and prepare for the day when he would inherit it. As a result, the two siblings had spent very little time together.

But Eiwass was still her brother. Elizabeth had heard her fair share of rumors about him and knew what his real temperament was like. She could immediately tell that the serious expression he wore now was his true self—the one he seldom let through.

"You want to know why I'm actually here, right?" Eiwass asked. He paused for a moment. "Elizabeth, can't you come back?"

"You came all the way here to ask that? Ridiculous." She got up from her seat.

"Wait," said Eiwass, stopping her. "I'm not asking you to go back to serving that idiotic old man and his incompetent son who only ever thinks with his crotch."

Elizabeth sat back down and gestured for him to continue.

"I want you to come to the side of the master I serve."

"*You* serve someone?" Elizabeth blurted out, astonished.

Eiwass was a competent man, but he was also shrewd and merciless. As far as she knew, he'd turn against anyone the moment they showed an ounce of vulnerability. And yet, someone had actually gained his genuine trust and support? Elizabeth was utterly shocked. She couldn't picture anyone in the kingdom who could have accomplished such a feat.

"I did feel like recent political developments were strange," she said. "I did everything I could to destroy the relationships between Haldoria and its vassals, yet they're already being restored. I knew Roselia was doing her best to undo the damage, but there was only so much she could have done given her position. When I got rid of minor nobles to weaken the kingdom's military, someone even took advantage of that to shift the balance of power toward the capital.

The kingdom has purged corrupt nobles at an impressive pace and replaced them with competent, decent people. This has all been done in Friede's name, but I knew that idiot couldn't be behind it."

Eiwass brought a hand to his chin and waited for Elizabeth to finish organizing her thoughts.

"The strangest thing was the news I received at the time of the counterfeit money incident. Someone arrived at the palace, but I was never able to find out who. Stranger still, that person never left. From that moment onward, the kingdom's attitude shifted. The government started ruling in a sensible way, and some areas of the palace became so secluded and tightly guarded that no information could slip away."

All the pieces of the puzzle finally came together in Elizabeth's mind.

"May I ask the name of the person you serve?" she finally asked.

Eiwass nodded and immediately replied, "The first princess of the Kingdom of Haldoria, Her Highness Adel Haldoria."

As he watched his sister's reaction, Eiwass could tell she'd guessed before she even asked. She seemed convinced and was not surprised in the slightest.

"Her Highness... So Adel is back..."

"She is."

Unlike her foolish brother, Adel was a wise young woman. She'd always loved and cherished Elizabeth as though she were her own sister, and Elizabeth returned her affection.

"I've decided to serve her," Eiwass declared. "She'll sit on the Haldorian throne one day, and I'm here to ask you to support her with me."

Elizabeth did not answer, so Eiwass continued, "I know you want to get revenge on Friede and our moronic king. You've given up on the Haldorian people too, haven't you? That's fine; I won't ask you

to devote your life to them like you once did. Just help Her Highness during business hours and live your life as you please outside of that. That'll be enough. And if it's what you want, Her Highness will hand over those who have wronged you, for you to do with as you please."

"Is that so...?"

Hesitation flickered in Elizabeth's eyes. Considering everything that had happened in recent weeks, Elizabeth trusted that Adel had the means to make her revenge happen. She thought about it for a while, then looked straight into Eiwass's eyes.

"I don't want to fight Adel," she said. "But even if our intentions are aligned, our paths diverge."

"Does that mean you refuse?"

"Indeed."

"Are you sure you've given this enough thought?" Eiwass asked. "You've already killed father. All that's left is for you to get rid of Bulat and Friede. Perhaps his little brat of a mistress too, if you feel like it. Her Highness can make that happen."

"I know she can. But that does not change my answer."

"I see... Then can I at least ask you to refrain from involving the people?"

"I decline," Elizabeth said. "If the need arises, I *will* use them. And so will you, brother. I know it."

"I suppose there is nothing more I can do or say. I will be taking part in the upcoming festival in Her Highness's place. You have a few weeks before I return home. Please think it over until then."

Having said his piece, Eiwass stood up and left Elizabeth's residence.

◇

We'd returned home after the parade, and I was sitting in my room with a nice cup of cocoa, listening to Alice's impressions of the procession. Lunoa and Misha were already in bed, but Alice was still so excited that she wasn't sleepy yet.

"Tomorrow Big Sister Lunoa and Big Sister Misha will do their matches, right, mama?"

"Yes. I got us a nice box so we can watch them comfortably."

"Mama, do you think they'll win?"

"I don't know. They're good for their age, but I'm sure there will be professional adventurers and knights fighting in the tournament."

The two of them most likely realized it too, but I doubted they could win the title. Even passing the qualifiers would already be a good performance.

"Then we have to do our best to cheer them on!" Alice said.

"You're right." I removed the hairpin Alice had bought me and put it away in the small box I kept on my bedside table. "Come on, let's go to bed, Alice."

"Okaaaay," Alice replied, climbing into bed.

I pulled the blanket over her. If she wanted to have enough energy to watch the entire tournament, it was high time for her to sleep.

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It's common knowledge that hairpins decorated with ice crystal ornaments sell very well in the dukedom. Children, in particular, often buy them for their mothers. While it isn't clear who started this custom, yours truly recently heard an interesting rumor while investigating the matter for this article. It looks like the famous Silver Witch might be involved. However, there are no

historical records that suggest the Silver Witch had a spouse or children. That is why my assumption is that these hairpins were, in fact, a product developed by the Silver Witch for her company, the Traitre Commercial Firm, which operates under the name Traitre Group nowadays. I have reached out to the current representative, Linkanette Carlton, but the group has declined to comment on anything related to the Silver Witch.

Excerpt from the weekly magazine *The Dukedom's Women's Era*, sold for four copper coins plus taxes.

Chapter 2: The Festival

Just like with the main tournament, the pair tournament would take place at the knights' training ground. There were plans to build a dedicated amphitheater like the one in the United Beast Kingdom, but the project had yet to be approved by the government. As a result, this year, both tournaments would be held at the same venue the main tournament used in previous years. Far fewer contestants had entered the pair tournament compared to the main one, so the qualifiers for the pairs would all occur simultaneously in the many rings that had been prepared. Misha and Lunoa had been assigned to Bloc C. If they won three matches there, they'd have the right to participate in the next phase of the competition.

"This is your box, Miss Ellie," said one of Darc's employees.

"Thank you. Go on, Alice, move further to the back so we can come in."

"Yes, mama!"

Mireille, Alice, and I would be observing the qualifiers. Barl was originally supposed to come with us, but Traitre's head of security had contacted him to discuss an issue, so he'd gone to him instead.

"Here," Mireille said, handing me two cups.

"Thank you."

I put them down in front of Alice and me. I had an iced coffee, while Alice had a glass of juice. Mireille had bought herself a glass of iced tea, and she took a sip before sitting down with us. She'd purchased the drinks here, at the venue. The box I'd gotten was higher than the regular seats, and there was a canopy over our heads to block the sun, but I imagined the spectators sitting in direct sunlight would be purchasing *many* drinks.

"Mr. Hokins sure came up with a great business idea," Mireille commented.

“The simplest ideas are often the most effective ones,” I said.

“He’s also quite efficient. He managed to implement the suggestion you made about performers in a very short time. I imagine he’ll make tremendous profits just from the sales of food and drinks.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed.

Just as Mireille had mentioned, Darc had been quick to make my idea a reality. While his usual areas of expertise were moneylending and controlling black markets, this went to show he was also a talented merchant in general.

While the two of us chatted, Alice clapped, mesmerized as an acrobat did a handstand atop a tower of three large balls. Eventually, the pre-qualifiers show ended, and the contestants of the pair tournament took to the stage. The qualifiers for the main tournament would only happen after they were done, and for the time being, the seats were far from packed. I imagined that was for the best. Fewer spectators would surely make the experience less stressful for Lunoa and Misha.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sorry for the wait!” the presenter exclaimed. “The time has finally come for the qualifiers of the first ever pair tournament to start!”

His speech boomed across the entire venue. I assumed he was using an item imbued with wind magic to amplify his voice.

“I expected as much, but it seems like this year, the ambiance will be quite different,” Mireille said.

“How so?” I asked.

“According to what I’ve heard, the commentary used to be more of a serious explanation of the techniques used by the fighters. You could truly feel the influence of the government.”

“Yet Mr. Hokins has gone and turned it into a piece of entertainment.”

“The commoners will surely be pleased, but I imagine many among the nobles will not take kindly to this change.”

While the presenter cracked a few jokes in a light and playful tone, I watched the nobles in the surrounding boxes. Mireille was right. Several were frowning. The majority of them appeared to be part of the army or the knights.

“I’m sure Mr. Hokins expected it,” I said. “He’s one of the members of the council, after all. He can handle a few unhappy noblemen. He has both the wealth and the authority to do so.”

I would soon need authority too. I still couldn’t come close to the members of the council in terms of wealth, but I’d accumulated a decent fortune. The next step would be to work on my influence. The issue was that with my current status, obtaining a peerage or an official position in the government would prove difficult. There were ways to overcome my limitations, but...

“Mama! Look! Big Sister Lunoa and Big Sister Misha are there!”

Alice’s voice pulled me out of my reverie and I looked down. Lunoa and Misha seemed to be a little stressed, but not too badly. It wouldn’t prevent them from fighting well. I scanned the other rings and spotted a few strong fighters. I was starting to look forward to finding out how far my two protégées would go.

“Do your best!” Alice screamed.

Lunoa and Misha’s first opponents were a burly man holding a shield and a spearman. They both appeared to be adventurers.

“A solid strategy,” Mireille said. “The front deflects attacks, and the rear reliably deals damage.”

“They do seem to lack the ability to deal explosive damage quickly, though,” I replied.

Lunoa used her magic to enhance Misha’s abilities, while the catkin gradually dealt damage to the spearman with her swift attacks. After she knocked the first man out, Misha distracted the shield bearer while Lunoa cast an intermediate-level spell and

defeated him.

“That was a surprisingly easy victory,” Mireille said. “Lunoa and Misha’s opponents both appeared to be stronger than them individually.”

“That’s true,” I replied. “But Lunoa and Misha’s coordination was far superior. These two men seemed more used to fighting in a party of four or five. The two of them were on the defensive. I imagine a sorcerer or an archer usually deals the damage in their party while they protect them.”

“That makes sense.”

“They lost because they couldn’t adapt their strategy to pair battles.”

Lunoa and Misha’s second match was against two young girls who fought barehanded. Next to the ring stood an older man, carefully observing the match—their mentor, I assumed. Misha dashed forward as soon as the battle started, while Lunoa stepped backward, putting distance between her and the opponents.

“They’re dividing the rear and front very clearly,” Mireille said.

“Their opponents are both infighters. I assume Misha intends to buy time for Lunoa to cast a big spell.”

Misha was losing ground fighting against the two girls at once, but when one of them tried to get past her and attack Lunoa, Misha unleashed a skill at the perfect time and successfully stopped her advance.

“Misha has been trying to do everything on her own lately. I think pairing up with Lunoa and training together did her some good in that regard,” Mireille said.

“It certainly did.”

Lunoa finally finished casting her spell, Wind Strike. The magic blew one of the girls out of the ring entirely, while the other suffered some damage. She tripped, and Misha took the chance to

thrust her dagger at her, defeating her.

“Their final opponents for the qualifiers are a swordsman and a sorcerer,” Mireille said.

“The way they carry themselves shows that they’re experienced.”

“That woman is carrying a magic item to heighten her defenses.”

“And while she’s trying to hide it with her mantle, there’s a dagger hanging at her hip. She won’t hide in the rear; she’s a middle-range sorcerer,” I replied.

“Mama, what’s a sorcerer? Isn’t that lady a magician?”

My wording seemed to have confused Alice.

“Mages, or magicians, are simply people who can cast lower-grade spells at the very least. But those who master magic enough to use it in battle are sometimes called sorcerers,” I explained. “Let’s take an example. You can use lower-grade spells, but you can’t fight, right, Alice? That means you’re a magician. Mireille, Lunoa, and I, on the other hand, are sorcerers.”

“That’s how the terms are classified by magic scholars, but regular people often mix them up or simply use mage or magician,” Mireille added.

“Okay!” Alice exclaimed.

She didn’t look like she truly understood the distinction, but her enthusiasm brought a smile to my lips. Few people bothered with the proper terms anyway, so it didn’t matter if she didn’t remember what sorcerers were.

The last match of the qualifiers for Misha and Lunoa ended up closer than the other two. As expected, the sorcerer could also fight at close range. She used spells with limited destructive force but rapid casting time and tried to triumph using her speed. However, she didn’t look like she was used to fighting with her teammate. The two had probably paired up only for the tournament, and they barely cooperated. They seemed to be aware of that problem and

tried to create two one-on-one fights to cover for that flaw, but Lunoa and Misha didn't let them. They refused to break formation and helped each other out at crucial times. Eventually, they took advantage of the swordsman's momentary lapse in attention to push him out of the ring. From that point onward, it became a two-versus-one clash against the sorcerer, and they successfully defeated her.

With that last win, Misha and Lunoa qualified for the final event.

◇

"Congratulations on passing the qualifiers," I said.

"Congratulations!" Alice happily parrotted.

I'd booked a private room at a good restaurant to celebrate Lunoa and Misha's success. The two of them wanted to go to bed early to rest up for the final stage of the tournament tomorrow, so we were having an early dinner.

"Your coordination was impressive," Mireille said.

"Thank you!" Misha replied.

"We've been working hard perfecting it ever since we decided to participate, so I'm glad we achieved results," Lunoa said.

"You've improved a lot," I told Lunoa. "Your control over your mana, the variety of spells you can cast, your timing, and even your choices of spells to suit each situation were all good."

"I think that's thanks to my work as an adventurer," she replied.

"You too, Misha. Your flexibility improved, and so did the strength of your blows."

"I-I think so too."

"The two of you did well. Have a good meal and go rest up for tomorrow."

“Yes, Miss Ellie!” the girls replied in unison.

On the second day of the festival, we left the residence early to head to the venue. To avoid congestion in the city, using a carriage without permission was prohibited during the festival. People could either use government-sanctioned stagecoaches or walk.

“Oh, hi, Miss Ellie,” said Yuu.

We ran into Yuu and Lily near the knights’ training ground. The two seemed to be off work today. Instead of her usual eastern garb, Yuu was wearing clothes from the Central Continent.

“This is unexpected. I didn’t think someone as strong as you would have any interest in a tournament like this one,” I told Yuu.

“Actually, I’m here for my disciple. She’s fighting in the pair tournament.”

“Oh, is that so?” I asked.

Yuu glanced at Lily and the young girl nodded. Next to her disciple was a running bird that was roughly the size of a pony. These bird monsters couldn’t fly, but they had powerful legs and could sprint very fast.

“Lunoa and Misha are also participating,” I said.

“They might end up facing each other, then,” Yuu said.

“That’s possible,” I replied. “I have a box reserved. Would you like to join us to spectate, Yuu?”

“You don’t mind? I’d love to take you up on that, if that’s all right.”

Apparently, the running bird was Lily’s teammate and her familiar, and they’d be taking part in the third match. Lunoa and Misha were scheduled to fight in the fourth match. If they both won their respective first battles, they’d be up against each other next.

We continued walking toward the training ground with Yuu and Lily in tow. We were surprised to find an array of street stalls in front of the venue that weren't there yesterday. Many of the stalls sold small monsters such as snowchirps, minirabbits, or flowercats, as well as accessories for familiars.

"So cute!" Alice squealed, running up to a small cage with an open top, inside which were several monsters.

"They're monsters, aren't they?" Lunoa asked.

"Are they really allowed to sell monsters?"

"These are all harmless, so I don't think it's an issue," I said. "They're no different from pets, really."

"It looks like they have permission from the Merchants' Guild, so I don't see a problem with it either," Yuu added.

The permission Yuu had just mentioned came in the form of a small permit plastered next to the monsters' cages. Selling monsters without a permit was illegal.

"Mama! This one is so cute!" Alice said, picking up a small monster with a red gemstone embedded in its forehead. It was no bigger than a kitten.

"Oh my, a carbuncle? That's rare," I said.

"Are they?"

"Yes," I replied. "Carbuncles are closer to spirits than monsters. They live in remote forests, and since adult carbuncles can use concealment and illusion magic, they're nearly impossible to catch."

"You sure know your stuff, miss," the peddler said. "This lil' one lost its parents; that's how my friend found it. He couldn't find a buyer, though, so I offered to bring it to the big city since I was coming for the festival."

"I can imagine. Carbuncles are difficult to sell," I said.

“Why is that?” Misha asked. “They’re adorable and you said they could use magic. You’d think they’d sell very well as familiars.”

“Well…”

I was about to answer when Alice pulled on my sleeve and interrupted me. “Mama! I wanna keep it!”

I hummed pensively. If Alice liked it, I wanted to buy it for her, but carbuncles were a little special. The peddler seemed to know it, and when he saw me hesitate, he didn’t try to push the sale. Still, he seemed eager to get rid of the creature and looked at Alice and me intently, his eyes filled with hope.

“Carbuncles need water and mana to live,” I said. “Try feeding it. If it likes your mana, you can keep it, Alice.”

“Okay!”

“Her…mana?” Lunoa said, puzzled.

“Carbuncles have a very peculiar diet. In the wild, they feed on the mana contained in the purest streams of water. Pet carbuncles thrive if they like their master’s mana, but when that isn’t the case, one must constantly be on the hunt for magic stones they’ll enjoy to keep them alive.”

That was certainly why the vendor was so eager to sell it. Keeping a carbuncle alive was expensive.

“Channel some mana in your hand, Alice,” Yuu told her. “It’s not difficult. Just remember the way it feels when you cast a spell and do it the same way.”

“I’ll try!”

Under Yuu’s guidance, Alice managed to produce a steady trickle of mana. The carbuncle twitched and approached her hand. It buried its nose into her palm and examined her mana closely.

“Ah!” Alice let out as the carbuncle started licking her mana.

“It looks like it likes your mana, Alice,” I said. I turned to the peddler and added, “I’ll take it off your hands. How much do you want for it?”

“Thanks, miss! That’ll be twelve gold coins!”

“What?!” Lunoa and Misha both exclaimed.

They seemed surprised, but I wasn’t at all. The price was right within my expectations. The seller had to recoup the losses he’d incurred buying magic stones to feed the carbuncle.

“Mireille,” I said.

“Yes, miss,” she answered, immediately handing the peddler the twelve coins he’d asked for.

He was taken aback that I paid all of the gold upfront without hesitating, but he seemed relieved and happily accepted the payment. He even threw in a collar for free.

Alice was cuddling her new pet while grinning ear to ear when Lily asked her, “What are you going to name it?”

“Name it…” Alice repeated.

She looked up at me, and after I told her that she should decide, she started frowning. She appeared to be deep in thought. As for the carbuncle, it kept eating from her hand until it was full, then it ran up her arm and settled on her head. It seemed comfortable up there and curled into a ball.

Once we reached the training grounds, Lunoa, Misha, and Lily left to join the other contestants, and one of the employees showed us to our box.

“Oh! So this is what the boxes are like,” Yuu said, looking

around.

“Couldn’t you have secured one fairly easily if you’d tried?” I asked.

“I could have, but it felt like a waste. I planned to come alone, after all.”

“That makes sense.”

Yuu and I chatted until the presenter announced that the third match was about to start. It was time for Yuu’s disciple and her familiar to fight.

Lily rode on her running bird, and she relied on her mobility to win her first match.

“If Lunoa and Misha pass the first round too, our disciples will clash, Miss Ellie,” Yuu said.

I paused. “Our disciples?” I supposed she was correct. In a way, these two were my disciples. “You’re right,” I said. “I’m looking forward to that.”

While we were talking, Lunoa and Misha’s fight started. They were fighting two rookie city guards. The guards’ coordination was decent, but they weren’t all that skilled individually. They must have been lucky and ended up in easy matches during the qualifiers. On top of their mediocre skills, they started off looking down on Misha and Lunoa for being young girls. As a result, they were taken aback by Misha’s speed. She closed the distance in a heartbeat as soon as the match started and threw off the guards’ balance. Lunoa took advantage of that to unleash Wind Gust and send them flying out of the ring.

We watched the other matches of the first round, and soon after noon, the second round began. Yuu and her big axe seemed to have influenced Lily because she used a hatchet to fight. She also had a nata—an eastern machete—hanging off her hip. Like last time, she was with her running bird.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this pair tournament is about to get even more exciting! The next match will have Lily and Momo facing Lunoa and Misha! Despite being so young, these three girls showed us wonderful performances during their first matches! Lily is our only contestant who chose to pair up with a familiar! During her first match, she rode on its back and fought as one with this swift monster! Misha and Lunoa, on the other hand, are textbook examples of a balanced team with a clear front and rear divide! Misha at the front displays brilliant flexibility, while Lunoa supports her from behind and deals big damage with her magic! Their incredible coordination has helped them defeat opponents far stronger than they are during the qualifiers!”

“The presenter’s tone is light, but his analysis is spot on,” I said.

“Well, Mr. Hokins handpicked him, after all,” Yuu replied.

Alice was so excited that she leaned over the fence to get a better look. I put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from falling and waited for the fight to start.

◆

About half of the seats at the venue were filled. At this time, plenty of exhibitions and luncheon meetings were most likely taking place, so there were only so many people who had chosen to come to watch the pair tournament.

Misha and Lunoa stepped into the ring. On the opposite side, Lily and her familiar entered.

“Your running bird,” Lunoa said. “Its name is Momo, right?”

“Yep,” Lily confirmed. “Momo can’t fly but can move quickly. And you don’t want to be on the other end of a kick.”

After exchanging a few words at the center of the ring, the two teams moved to opposite sides. Lily hopped onto Momo’s back. She held the reins in one hand and her hatchet in the other. As soon as the referee signaled the start of the fight, Momo dashed forward.

“Miss Lunoa!” Misha yelled.

“I know!”

Lunoa tapped her staff against the stone floor and started chanting.

“O wind, let your pressure sever this space: Air Wall!”

Wind surged in front of Misha and Lunoa, creating a barricade that blocked Lily’s advance. Lunoa immediately started casting her next spell while Misha prepared to protect her. She focused her full attention on the left and right edges of the wall, but suddenly, a shadow appeared on the ground. Misha reflexively looked upward and raised her dagger. Momo had jumped over the wall. The bird’s wings were spread out, and she couldn’t see Lily. When she noticed that Lily was *not* riding on Momo’s back anymore, Misha realized her mistake.

“Oh shoot!” she exclaimed, turning her gaze back downward.

At the same time, Lily, who’d coated her body in water,

forcefully broke through the wall of wind while swinging her hatchet. The pressure of the wind had lowered the force of the blow, so Misha managed to stop it without shattering her dagger.

“Not bad, Misha!” Lily said.

She pivoted on her right foot and unsheathed the nata hanging at her hip, swinging it diagonally upward. Her aim was crude, but the attack was so swift and powerful that Misha didn’t want to risk trying to block it. Instead, she twisted her upper body to dodge. Lily had been waiting for her to do that, though. Momo, who had been approaching Lunoa, suddenly turned back and aimed a kick at Misha.

“Careful, Misha!” Lunoa exclaimed.

“I’ve got this!”

Misha ducked under the bird’s kick and used her guardian dagger to block another blow from Lily. The two girls clashed, thrusting their weapons at each other and parrying in turn. As her concentration heightened, Misha found that the cheers of the public, which had been a source of pressure and stress at the start, gradually faded into nothingness. Misha’s senses were focused entirely on the movements of Lunoa, Lily, and Momo.

“Shoot forth and let your pressure pulverize my enemies: Air Bullet!” Lunoa chanted. She fired her magical bullet at Lily from the side.

Right before the spell was about to hit Lily, Momo charged across the ring. Lily grabbed onto the bird just in time to be pulled out of the way..

“Miss Lunoa! Support me!” Misha instructed.

“Got it!”

Lunoa followed up her previous attack with a barrage of small air bullets, and Misha ran behind them. Misha shifted her guardian dagger to her left hand and pulled a small knife from her pocket with her right, hurling it at her opponents. Lily threw the sheath of

her nata in return, and both projectiles collided in the air, falling to the ground between the girls. Without wasting a moment, Lily jumped off Momo's back and dashed toward Misha. Since the two girls were running at full speed, they closed the distance that separated them in just a few seconds.

"Momo!" Lily yelled.

At her signal, the bird sped up and rammed its body into Lunoa, sending her flying to the edge of the ring. Lunoa had been preparing a spell to counter Momo, but she hadn't been fast enough. However, Momo did not pursue Lunoa any further; instead, it ran toward Misha to support Lily.

Lunoa immediately jumped to her feet and started chanting, but Momo reached Misha before she could finish. Lily and Momo attacked the catkin in unison.

"Fake Step," Misha said.

"Huh?!" Lily gasped, surprised.

Misha's upper body swayed in elusive, irregular motions, and she evaded Lily's nata at the very last moment. Lily wasn't done, though. She pressed the attack with Momo.

"O water, lash my enemies: Water Whip!" Lily chanted.

Water surged from the tip of her nata, extending into a whip. This spell wasn't very destructive, but it became incredibly difficult to deal with for anyone intertwined in its watery coils. Misha assumed that its effectiveness depended on the abilities of the caster, but she'd once seen Ellie use the very same spell. The whip she had conjured was as sticky as glue, and none of her opponents had managed to break free from their bonds. If Misha got distracted by Lily's whip, though, she'd leave herself open to Momo's fierce kicks.

Lunoa was already running back toward the fray, but the few seconds that it would take for her to arrive felt unbearably long to Misha.

“Oh no!”

An instant of distraction was all it took for Lily’s whip to wrap around Misha’s leg. Unlike Ellie’s spell, it didn’t stop her from moving altogether immediately, but it was clear that it would impede her mobility.

“I’ve got you!” Lily shouted proudly.

Lily covered her fist with a thick layer of water and aimed a punch at Misha’s chest while Momo kicked at her stomach.

“Huh?! Careful, Momo! Get back!” Lily hurriedly warned.

The running bird yelped. Right before their combined attack could land, Lunoa had used a defensive spell to protect Misha. When Lily and Momo had both focused their attention on Misha, Lunoa had changed the spell she was casting midway, going for a defensive spell. She hadn’t been sure she’d be able to get close enough to Misha in time, but she made it work at the last moment.

The spell that Lunoa had cast was the trigger to a combined attack that was rather difficult to land in combat. Misha and Lunoa both needed to have perfect timing to pull it off. Once Lunoa’s wind blocked the enemies’ blows, Misha would have to follow up with the counter. Ever since they’d decided to register for the tournament, Lunoa and Misha had trained hard to perfect this synchronized strike.

“Rebellion Wind!” Lunoa called out.

A gust of wind started blowing, centered on Misha. Simultaneously, Misha poured mana into her dagger. The weapon was imbued with one of Lunoa’s spells: Air Bullet. Several bullets whizzed out and merged with Rebellion Wind to blow Lily and Momo out of the ring.

Momo let out a little cry and kicked Lily’s back in midair to push her toward the ring. While the running bird fell out of bounds, Lily escaped defeat.

“Momo!” she wailed. She couldn’t stop now, though, and she

tightly grasped the hatchet in her right hand and the nata in her left.

“Are you okay, Misha?!” Lunoa asked.

“I’m fine. Your timing was perfect, just like we practiced,” Misha replied.

Lunoa swung her staff, letting a soft breeze rise. She was using a lower-level spell and one of the few for which she could use silent casting effectively. It allowed her to sense the movements of the people around her and to hinder or speed up their movements if she chose to, though its effects were limited.

She gently pushed Misha, who was holding her dagger in a reverse grip and keeping her body lowered in a fighting stance, forward. Then, she randomly disrupted the flow of air around Lily to distract her.

Lily was the first to break the standoff. She threw her hatchet and shifted her nata from her left hand to her right hand. Then, she dashed forward, following the trajectory of her hatchet to conceal herself. However, the hatchet swiftly deviated from its path due to Lunoa’s wind, and Lily found herself clashing head-on with Misha. Lily swung her nata and Misha used her left arm to deflect the blow, pushing on the flat of the blade. Then, she struck Lily with the hilt of her dagger.

“Argh!”

Lily rolled on the ground, moaning in pain. The referee immediately ran up to her to check on her condition and promptly declared her unable to continue fighting.

“Victory goes to Lunoa and Misha!”

Suddenly, Lunoa and Misha became aware of the loud cheers of the public echoing around them again. Although they hadn’t noticed, the seats had filled up while they were fighting. The venue was at least seventy percent full by now.

The two girls bowed to the public then left the ring, waving.

◇

After the match, I bid goodbye to Yuu, who left to get Lily. I also parted ways with Mireille and Alice, who went to join Lunoa and Misha on a stroll through the vendors' stalls. As promised during our last meeting, I met up with Egret, and the two of us walked around the lively streets. During the festival, there was music everywhere; one could hear beginners play in one street and professional musicians from the imperial palace perform in the next.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go, Ellie?" Egret asked.

"Nowhere in particular," I replied. "It's my first time taking part in the festival, and I was so busy with the preparations for my firm that I had no time to look into the schedule of festivities."

"I see. Then please allow me to escort you today," he said, dramatically presenting his arm for me to take.

"I shall leave it all to you," I replied, linking my arm with his.

Egret carried himself like an actor on the stage, but somehow, his behavior did not feel out of place. In fact, he looked very elegant. Sometimes, the sons of wealthy merchant families were taught by the same tutors as nobles, and they ended up developing noble-like etiquette and mannerisms. Egret must have had this type of upbringing.

"Oh, Miss Ellie."

I heard someone call my name and turned to face them. "Yes?" A woman wearing glasses was approaching. "Miss Arte! It's been a long time," I said as I recognized her.

"It has indeed. We haven't had the chance to see each other since you moved your headquarters to the capital," she said.

Arte Hilgardie worked as an investigator for the legal department of the Merchants' Guild. We'd met during an ordeal involving a stolen soap recipe. After that, we'd had meals together a few times while I had lived in Lucas's territory.

“Did you travel to the capital for the festival?” I asked.

“Not quite. I used to work here and was only in Lord Lucas’s territory temporarily because of a personnel shortage. I finally finished training the new recruits, so I’ve returned to the capital.”

“I never knew that,” I said.

“By the way, who is your companion?” she asked.

I introduced him. “This is Egret Birch. He’s the head of a firm from the Nile Kingdom.”

“I’m Arte Hilgardie, an investigator for the legal department of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Egret said. As he shook hands with Arte, a young boy ran up to her.

“I’m sorry for the wait, sister!”

“You have a younger brother?” I asked.

“Yes,” Arte said, looking expectantly at him.

The boy straightened his posture and politely greeted us.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Nestart Hilgardie, Baron of Hilgardie. I’m much obliged to you for looking after my sister.”

“I’m Ellie Leis, a merchant,” I replied. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance too, Lord Nestart.”

“Likewise; it’s a pleasure,” Egret said. “I’m Egret Birch, a merchant from the Nile Kingdom.”

Nestart seemed to be a *very* courteous and well-mannered boy.

“So, you’re from House Hilgardie, Miss Arte,” I said. “Since Lord Nestart is still a minor, I assume you must be his guardian.”

“I am. I had left the family and became a commoner, but after

the sudden passing of our father, I returned to act as my brother's guardian until he comes of age. In fact, I called him to the capital so we could fill out the necessary paperwork together today."

If I recalled correctly, House Hilgardie was a family of nobles of the robe who had owned no land until very recently. When the empire had absorbed some of Haldoria's territory after the counterfeit money incident, half of the land had gone to Lucas. The other half had been placed under the direct control of the emperor, but after a while, he'd split it into small territories that he'd granted to those he deemed had served him well. I assumed House Hilgardie had received a piece of land at that moment. Inheriting a title in the middle of such impactful changes—and at such a young age—must have been very difficult for Arte's brother.

"I see," I replied. "Allow me to offer my condolences. If there is anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to reach out to me, Lord Nestart."

"Thank you, Miss Ellie. I'm very fortunate to have so unexpectedly run into one of the famous Special License holders. And I'm sure you're knowledgeable about foreign goods I've never so much as heard about, Mr. Egret. I'd love to talk at length with both of you one day if our schedules permit it."

"You're too kind, my lord. Thank you very much," I replied.

"Absolutely," Egret said. "Let's do that if we have the chance."

Egret and I both bowed politely to the young lord, and he and his sister left to go fill out the papers Arte had mentioned.

"Impressive kid, considering his age," Egret commented.

"He may be young, but he's a baron now. The lives of his fiefdom's inhabitants are in his hands. That responsibility must have forced him to grow up," I said.

Even though I genuinely wanted to help Lord Nestart with his responsibilities, this was something I couldn't do anything about. Egret and I watched the siblings walk away in silence until they

disappeared around a corner. Then, we continued our walk and headed toward what appeared to be a confectionery shop for a sweet treat.

◆

Friede was at his desk in his office in the royal palace of Haldoria, putting the final touches on a document.

“I’m done,” he said.

“Thank you. This one is next,” said the woman standing at his side like a secretary.

Crow, as she’d introduced herself, was dressed much like a prostitute, which made her look incredibly out of place passing formal documents to a prince. The one she’d just given him concerned transforming a road that connected a small village to the royal capital into a highway.

“I’ve been doing what you’ve asked, but are you sure this bland, boring work is gonna make me king? Civil officials could be taking care of insignificant matters like this one. Shouldn’t I be distinguishing myself on the battlefield and dealing real damage to our lifelong enemy, that hateful empire?”

“You needn’t worry. While it is true that commoners long for strong kings during dangerous times, the current status quo between the kingdom and the empire is stable enough that people are not worried about war. If you go out of your way to provoke one, they’ll loathe you rather than revere you.”

“But many of the ministers who support me criticize my father for being weak because he made peace with the empire.”

“Those with connections to merchants or slave traders do not enjoy peace,” Crow said. “They know how to make their voices loud, but the truth is that there are few of them. Besides, Lord Fadgal, who stands at the head of the army, opposes war. As long as he suppresses the bellicists, no amount of skirmishes will turn into a full-scale war. In other words, what you could gain on the

battlefield at the moment is nothing but the superficial support of a couple of minor nobles. The expected returns are simply not worth the risks."

"R-Right... You're absolutely right. In fact, I was thinking exactly the same thing."

"I wouldn't expect anything less of you, Your Highness," Crow replied. She pointed to the document. "This place is nothing but a small farmers' village at the moment, but if this road is repaired and maintained appropriately, the town will be on the shortest path connecting Viscount Deckenhaueur's territory to the capital. And as it so happens, a gold vein was recently discovered in the Deckenhaueur Viscounty."

"What?!"

"According to my sources, Viscount Deckenhaueur has been recruiting mining engineers and miners for the past few months. After some probing, they've found a gold vein. The official news should reach the palace any day now. Now, what if you just so happened to be in the midst of a renovation project of the highway, which would connect the Deckenhaueur Viscounty to the capital, right as the report came in? If you play your cards right, you could become very much involved in the circulation of all this gold."

"I see... All right, I understand. I shall hurry this road project along."

"Please do, Your Highness. Oh, and while you're at it, if you could please sign these. This is a petition from the people of the village I mentioned before. You must show that you're a ruler with a gentle heart who is always ready to listen to the voices of the weak."

"Right."

Friede took the papers from Crow and got back to work. Most of that "work" was copying word for word what Crow had written and signing his name at the end, so finishing up did not take him too long. Once he had finished, he reached for the cup of tea Crow had

served him. It had a peculiar flavor—one that he'd never tasted before—but Friede liked it.

"Are we done for the day?" Friede asked.

"That is enough paperwork, yes. But you do have a meeting planned with a merchant."

"All right. My work sure has been going smoother since you became my secretary."

"You've always been a brilliant man, Your Highness. Those who served you previously were just incompetent."

"Of course they were. *Adel* sent them to me. She must have ordered them to hinder me as much as they could."

Friede was in the best of moods after being praised by Crow, and when one of his servants came to notify him that the merchant had arrived, he happily arose from his seat.

The merchant awaiting him in the drawing room was a foreign woman he'd met through Sylvia. She'd told him she came from some small nation—one of Haldoria's vassal states, he believed—but he'd completely forgotten which one.

"It's been a while, Chris," Friede greeted her.

"It has, Your Highness."

"What happened to your arm?" he asked, surprised. Since the last time he'd seen her, Chris's right arm had been replaced by a magic prosthetic limb.

"I apologize for showing you something so unsightly. I was attacked by a monster during my travels. I was lucky enough to escape with my life, but I lost an arm. Thankfully, a skilled artisan I know succeeded in making me this magic prosthetic limb, so the loss does not inconvenience me in any way."

"I see. What misfortune," Friede said, taking a seat opposite

Chris. “Now, shall we move on to business?”

“Of course, Your Highness. Do you have a request for me?”

“I do. Hey, bring me the list,” Friede said, turning to Crow, who’d been standing quietly at the back of the room. He accepted a small stack of papers from her and handed them to Chris. “I need you to send the items on this list to the Nile Kingdom as aid. This part of the list is for orphanages.”

“I’d be happy to, but a firm as modest as mine cannot deliver an order of this magnitude all at once. It’ll have to be split into several deliveries.”

“I don’t mind,” Friede replied.

Crow had discussed that very thing with him ahead of time. She’d even told him that continuous support would earn him more praise from the people than one big shipment.

“I’ve already filled out the paperwork to simplify your visits to the Nile Kingdom. Pick up the permit from my servants on your way out.”

In the past, Friede’s word would have carried enough weight for Chris to do as he’d asked without any written authorization, but he now needed Adel’s approval for these things.

“Thank you very much for your consideration,” Chris said.

“I’m counting on you,” Friede told her.

After his meeting with Chris, Friede was finally done with his work for the day. When he returned to his quarters, Sylvia was waiting for him with a grim expression. She was still only his fiancée, not his wife, but after the uprising that had occurred in her father’s territory, Sylvia had no family to return to. As a result, Friede had invited her to live in his quarters despite the breach of etiquette. Bulat hadn’t been thrilled with the idea, but since Adel had given Friede permission, Sylvia now lived with him.

“You’ve worked hard today as usual, Your Highness,” Sylvia said.

“That’s a long face you’re making, Sylvie. What’s wrong?”

“My prince… Did you spend the day working alone with that woman today too?”

“Huh? Well, yes, but… Ah, I get it! You’re jealous, aren’t you? Don’t worry, Sylvie. I only have eyes for you.”

“It’s not that! Don’t you think it’s strange, Your Highness? She appears out of nowhere and suddenly becomes your secretary?! What even happened to the previous one?”

“He went back to his family home because his parents fell sick. You’re reading too far into this, Sylvie. You don’t need to worry.”

“Of course I need to worry! Everything about her is beyond suspicious! What I don’t understand is why no one is saying anything even though she walks around the royal palace dressed like a harlot!”

“C-Calm down, Sylvie. What’s gotten into you? I agree that the clothes she wears are a bit peculiar. But that’s only because she’s from a foreign land. People dress that way over there.”

“What?!”

Sylvia was flabbergasted. Friede seemed to have no clue that the explanation he’d just given her made no sense. Even though his position was precarious at the moment, Friede was still Haldoria’s crown prince. His secretary had no business being a foreign woman with no credentials to speak of.

“Your Highness, what is happening to you?!” Sylvia asked. “Do you not understand the situation you’re in? Do you not comprehend the situation *I*’m in? Why do you think Her Highness allowed me to live here even though I have no backing and no family anymore? I’m practically a commoner now!”

“Don’t say that, Sylvie. I understand you’re feeling anxious after losing your parents, but I swear I will protect you.”

“I don’t care about them!” Sylvia screamed. “It’s just plain as day that Her Highness is using me to—”

“My, I never knew you had such a temper, Lady Sylvia.”

Sylvia let out a surprised shout.

“Crow? Did you need something?” Friede asked.

“I’ve come to give you an important document for tomorrow. Please take a look at it when you have a chance, Your Highness,” Crow said.

“All right, I will,” Friede replied.

Sylvia had jumped back at the sudden appearance of Crow behind Friede’s back. She sometimes did that—appearing and disappearing without warning, and that habit of hers made Sylvia even more uneasy. The most bizarre thing was that no one else seemed to find it strange.

Sylvia glared at Crow’s face, which was for the most part concealed by a black veil. “Hello, Miss Crow.”

“Hello, Lady Sylvia,” said Crow in return.

Sylvia had already made up her mind. If she couldn’t convince Friede today, she’d go to Adel to seek protection. Sylvia had noticed that Adel always appeared to avoid Crow. Relying on Adel, who seemed to despise Sylvia, was a risky move, but she had no other option. She had no home to flee to and no allies. It was obvious to her that Adel was trying to use her to damage Friede’s standing, but she far preferred a foe she understood to a mysterious stranger like Crow. If she helped the princess push Crow out, perhaps Adel might spare her life.

“It looks like it broke again,” Crow said.

“Huh?”

Sylvia had been on guard, but before she knew it, Crow had closed the distance that separated them. Crow was close enough to

touch Sylvia, and she lifted her hand and rested it on Sylvia's forehead. Sylvia wanted nothing more than to slap that hand away, but her body refused to move.

"You sometimes run into people like this," Crow said. "They don't have particularly strong mana, and they don't train either, yet for some reason, they're awfully resistant to trances and suggestion. You're quite a handful, you know that? A terrible miscalculation."

Sylvia felt as though she were in a dream, and everything Crow had said was part of that dream too.

“...vie! Sylvie!”

“Huh? Y-Your Highness...?”

“What’s wrong, Sylvie? You’re spacing out,” said the prince.

“I-It’s just... I... Wh-where is Miss Crow?”

“Crow? I haven’t seen her since I finished work. I imagine she might still be in my office.”

“But... No, it’s nothing...”

“You’ve been through a lot recently, Sylvie. You should rest up early today, all right?”

“Yes...” Sylvia answered, feeling completely lost.

◇

The confectionery Egret led me to sold curious candies made out of melted sugar and processed into fine thread using centrifugal force.

“Have you ever eaten that, Ellie?” he asked.

“No. It’s my first time seeing it, in fact.”

“This is called sugar floss,” Egret told me. “It has an interesting texture that melts and disappears in your mouth.”

“Oh my!”

“I’ve only had it once before,” he added. He stepped away for a moment to purchase two portions of sugar floss on sticks. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” I said. I took one of the sticks and tried a bite of the cotton-like confection. The flavor was pure sugar, but the texture made a world of difference. It was fascinating.

“The taste is rather unremarkable, but the texture makes it very interesting, right?” Egret said.

“I like the lingering sweetness,” I replied. “I want to let Alice try

it next time."

"This stall will be here during the entire festival, so you should definitely bring the kids."

"I will," I said.

We enjoyed a few more snacks from the nearby food stalls before Egret escorted me to another plaza closer to the noble district. Artists from all over the empire had gathered in this plaza to put on performances. When we arrived, two painters were collaborating on a large canvas while a group of musicians who'd most likely met by chance played together.

"Oh my."

There was so much to see, but my eyes stopped on a group of children selling embroidered handkerchiefs. They seemed to be orphans trying to raise money by selling their creations. They were a little out of place in the middle of all these artists putting on various spectacles. However, I imagined they were given a stall here to avoid having to compete with the over-prepared merchants and peddlers waging a ruthless battle to attract customers. Those who came to enjoy the fine arts were often relatively wealthy, and I could spot incognito nobles among the commoners. If you thought about it that way, giving the orphans this specific spot was an act of charity.

"They're pretty good."

Egret was right. The embroideries were quite well-made for the handiwork of children. Needless to say, they were nowhere near as good as what a professional seamstress could make, but they were neatly stitched.

"W-W-Welcome, dear customers," one of the children said as we approached. The poor child looked a little tense.

"Hello," I said in the softest tone I could muster to avoid making him more anxious. "Did you embroider these yourself?"

“Yes,” he replied. “Everyone at the orphanage helped.”

“Amazing,” I said, picking up a handkerchief and looking at the embroidery closely. “May I get this one, this one, and that one there?”

“Th-Thank you!”

While the boy was gathering the handkerchiefs I wanted to buy, I asked him where exactly his orphanage was located. When I heard the address, I realized it was one of the facilities to which I made regular donations. After paying, I waved goodbye to the children and walked away with Egret. He looked as though he’d seen something amusing.

“That was unexpected,” I said.

“What was?”

“You’re always so smug that I thought you’d step in at the last moment and try to pay for me.”

“Oho? Did you want me to gift these to you?”

“No,” I replied. “I wouldn’t have let you even if you had offered.”

“I figured as much,” he said. “I would have jumped at the chance to pay if I thought you were purchasing them for yourself. But I’m not foolish enough to stop you from making investments as the head of your firm, even if it’s a small amount.”

Egret spotted a stall that sold fruit-infused water and purchased two drinks.

“There you go, princess. This one’s on me,” he said, handing me a cup.

I laughed at his forced princely tone. “You sure are an amusing man.”

“So, what’s the plan with the handkerchiefs?” he asked.

“I’m thinking of giving work to the orphanage. But I haven’t figured out the details yet.”

“Mmm. That’s the kind of idea some high-ranking government official would have, don’t you think?”

“I don’t agree,” I said. “I believe merchants should proactively support orphanages.”

“Why is that?”

“The first reason is manpower. Since we’re talking about children with no particular skills, you obviously cannot expect high-quality detailed work, but it’s about the cheapest labor you can get. And yet, as far as the orphans are concerned, it still pays better than anything else they could do *and* allows them to learn useful, marketable skills. Without guarantors or sponsors, the only positions they can usually pursue are government-sponsored. That means all they can do is clean the streets or run errands for the knights.”

“And what’s your second reason?”

“Raising future customers,” I replied. I took a sip of the fruit-infused water and enjoyed the way the sweetness rolled over my tongue before being replaced by a slightly sour aftertaste. “If these children grow into financially stable adults, they’ll become potential customers, won’t they?”

“One must be *very* patient.”

“A fair point. But can you deny that it’s true?”

“I can’t, and to be honest, I don’t want to. You haven’t changed my mind, though. You do think like a ruler, not like a merchant.” Egret smiled as though I’d said something funny.

I didn’t find it funny. “Are you trying to mock me?” I asked. I had no doubt Egret knew who I truly was.

“I’d never do that,” he said. “I’m just telling you the truth as I see it. Even if you have no intention of going back to the kingdom,

don't you want a position of power somewhere else?"

"I'm a woman," I replied.

"And? When someone's as gifted as you are, these kinds of limitations and biases don't apply, do they?"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"I *meant it* as a compliment."

Egret and I continued to walk as we conversed. We eventually reached another area where merchants sold antiques and miscellaneous goods. There was a bit of everything; it was the kind of market where you could find hidden gems among the common, uninteresting items. As we passed by, merely looking at the stalls without stopping, something caught my eye. I paused and Egret, curious, took a look at the stall too before whistling.

"Excuse me," I called out to the vendor. "Did you source these items yourself?"

"I did," he said proudly. "I've been traveling and stocking whatever has caught my eye."

"I see. But you're pricing them too high. Don't you think fifteen silver coins is a bit much for this dirty candlestick? I'd be happy to take it off your hands for ten silver coins and eight copper coins, though."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in negotiating. I only chose items I liked, so I want them to go to people who'll pay their price and cherish them."

I tried my luck again, but the vendor wouldn't have it and refused every single offer.

"I'm really sorry, but my price is final," he said.

"Please don't apologize," I said. "*I* should be the one apologizing for testing you."

“Huh?”

“May I ask your name?”

“Embers.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ellie Leis. Tell me, Embers, do you have any idea what that candlestick you’re selling truly is?”

“Um, no. I just took a liking to it.”

“This was made by dwarves during the late Old Kingdom era. In this condition, it’s worth thirteen to seventeen silver coins, but if you cleaned it up properly, I’m sure you could get a gold coin out of it.”

“What?!”

“Your items are all genuine antiques,” I said.

The items that Embers displayed were *all* rare finds, while the other stalls had at best one decent item hidden in between worthless goods. On top of that, his prices were low. This proved he’d found them himself and had a very good eye.

“I’ll buy everything you’re selling,” I said. “And don’t worry, I’ll take great care of them. They’re all good items, after all.”

“Th-that’s… Thank you!”

“I run a firm called Traitre,” I told him. “Come visit me at a later date if you’d like.”

I wrote down the address of my residence on a scrap of paper and handed it to him along with the money. Then, I put away the items in my Grimoire of Mammon. Embers was so surprised by this turn of events that he was still staring at me open-mouthed, and I bid him farewell before walking away with Egret.

“Ha ha ha! First you ponder new business ideas, and now you scout talents?”

“He found all these treasures through intuition, not knowledge. There aren’t many with an eye as keen as that.”

“And as far as you’re concerned, *he*’s the treasure to be found, huh?” Egret declared smugly.

Despite his clever remark, as we continued to stroll through the antiques market, he and I both actively tried to recruit a few other promising merchants.

◇

That evening, I was lounging in the living room with Alice next to me, her pet carbuncle on her lap. Suddenly, Alice stood up.

She lifted the carbuncle up and exclaimed, “I’ve decided! Her name will be Carol!”

“Kyu! Kyu!” the carbuncle cried out happily.

Alice seemed to have spent the day thinking.

“That’s a great name,” Misha said.

“She seems to like it too,” Lunoa added, watching the carbuncle wiggle in Alice’s arms.

“I will head to the guild tomorrow to officially register her as a familiar,” Mireille said.

“Thank you, Mireille,” I replied.

To keep a monster in the capital, one had to register it with the Adventurers’ Guild. The paperwork required the owner to fill in the monster’s name, so I was glad Alice had made up her mind quickly.

“Now that this is settled, go take your bath, Alice.”

“Yes, mama!”

The little girl started walking off with her pet in tow, but I stopped her. “Hang on, Alice. Please leave Carol with me for now.”

“Eh?! Whyyy?”

“I need to figure out what types of magic stones she can eat in case you’re not able to feed her your mana. Don’t worry, I’ll be done by the time you’re out of the bath, so go on.”

“Okay...” she answered with a sullen look before following Mireille to the bathroom.

I’d told Mireille of my plans ahead of time, and I counted on her to keep Alice occupied for a while.

“It’s time for us to head back to our rooms,” Lunoa said.

“Good night,” Misha added.

“All right. Good night, you two.”

Now that I was alone, I had to start getting ready. What I had told Alice wasn’t a lie—I would *also* be doing that. I lined up several magic stones and magic gemstones in front of Carol.

“Kyu!” The carbuncle reacted only to a handful of magic gemstones.

“Carol... You’re a gourmet, aren’t you? I can see why the peddler was so eager to get rid of you.”

The magic gemstones she’d chosen were all expensive pieces of the finest quality. One magic gemstone could sustain a carbuncle for quite some time, but the expenses would still add up. That peddler had truly sold her to me for as low of a price as he possibly could.

“All right, time for the real work,” I said to myself.

I summoned my Grimoire of Belphegor, which allowed me to form contracts with monsters and spirits and to summon them. I’d decided to use it to form a contract with Carol. Usually, the monsters and spirits I had contracts with were ones I also summoned using my grimoire as the catalyst, but I could still form a contract with a monster I hadn’t summoned. It’d be my first time

doing so, however.

“Let’s get started,” I said, using ink imbued with mana to draw a magic circle. I put Carol atop the circle and poured my mana into it. “Hmm?” I murmured, confused.

My mana had been sent right back to me. Carol was refusing the contract.

“I guess you don’t agree with the conditions. In that case…”

I modified the conditions of the contract and poured mana into the circle once again. I’d initially tried demanding absolute obedience, but I knew that was unlikely to work. This time, I simply tried a contract that would only create a mana path between the two of us. I wouldn’t be able to summon or control Carol. Even if our mana compatibility wasn’t very good, this would likely go through.

Just as I’d expected, a mana path successfully opened. The magic circle rose into the air before disappearing inside Carol. With that connection, I’d be able to make Carol a little stronger so she could protect Alice in times of need.

“Take good care of Alice, all right?” I said.

“Kyu!”

I caressed Carol’s head until Alice came back, after which I returned her dear pet to her.

◇

Today, I was taking Alice to watch Lunoa and Misha fight in the next round of the pair tournament, accompanied by Mireille. This time, though, we had another person accompanying us.

“Look, Miss Ellie! They’re selling fruits I’ve never seen before over there!” our noisy companion exclaimed.

“Why don’t you go try one? Get us some while you’re at it,” I said, handing her a copper coin.

“Off I go!” she exclaimed. “Alice, you’re with me! Come on, let’s dash!”

“Yay!”

The ever-boisterous Tida grabbed Alice’s hand and started running toward the stall. Carol, who was sitting on Alice’s head, seemed to be enjoying the bumpy ride.

“Kyu!” she happily cried out.

I hadn’t been initially aware of it, but Tida had apparently been spectating the tournament since yesterday—although I was pretty sure she was only there to gamble. She’d noticed us in the box yesterday and had come to me to ask if she could join us today. I didn’t have any reason to refuse, so here we were, heading to the venue together.

The moment we arrived at the knights’ training ground, Tida purchased a betting slip. Just like with the tournament itself, Darc was managing the bets. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have put it past him to fix the matches, but I seriously doubted he’d try that with a tournament that the government had organized until very recently.

“Heh heh heh! Look at this, Miss Ellie. My win’s pretty much guaranteed.”

Tida wasn’t betting on the team tournament but on the main one. She’d put her money on the current favorite, Sistia.

“You chose the big favorite? You’re not as adventurous as I would have imagined when it comes to betting,” I replied.

“Why would I be? I don’t like betting—I like *winning* my bets,” she declared smugly.

“I’m not sure why you’re so proud of it,” I replied with a sigh. I handed Alice the sweet treat I’d bought her on the way.

◆

Lunoa sat in one of the waiting rooms for participants of the pair tournament, feeling incredibly nervous. In the previous rounds, she and Misha had faced rookie city guards and a girl about the same age as them. Their next opponents were much tougher, though. They’d have to fight Marty from Sharp Edge and Ned, a young dragonewt man—two Rank C adventurers. It was plain to see that Lunoa and Misha were outmatched.

“We’ll be fine, Miss Lunoa,” Misha said, trying her best to reassure her partner.

“W-W-We will...” Lunoa stammered before asking, “Say, Misha, don’t you get anxious?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t stressed at all, but I never expected us to win the whole thing. Making it past the qualifiers was already enough for me. All that matters now is how much I can learn from each fight.”

“I see... You’re right. Let’s give it our all and see what happens!”

Lunoa placed her witch hat atop her head and picked up her favorite staff just as a tournament worker came by to tell them it was time for the match to start. They left the waiting room and stepped into the ring as the crowd cheered.

On the opposite side, their adversaries appeared. While the presenter introduced the contestants in his usual light and energetic tone, Lunoa and Misha carefully scrutinized their competition. First was Marty, the scout of the Rank A adventurer party Sharp Edge, led by Elsa. She held her small bow in one hand and seemed

entirely relaxed. Neither Lunoa nor Misha had ever met her partner Ned in person, but they'd watched his matches during the tournament and knew he fought barehanded.

"They're strong," Lunoa whispered.

"They are," Misha replied under her breath. "Far stronger than we are."

The presenter finally finished the introductions, and the referee announced the start of the match. Misha immediately leaped forward, dagger in hand, while Lunoa began casting. This was the same strategy they'd employed in their previous fights. Needless to say, Marty and Ned had also watched the girls' matches and were prepared. Marty quickly nocked an arrow and sent it streaking toward Lunoa.

"Miss Lunoa!" Misha yelled, repelling the arrow before it could hit Lunoa.

That short distraction was enough for Ned to get to Misha. "Qu-Quick Motion!" he called out.

Quick Motion was a skill that allowed the user to traverse a few meters in an instant. Ellie often used it.

Misha groaned in surprise. "Power Slash!" she exclaimed, quickly retaliating against the dragonewt with a forceful swing of her dagger.

Just before Misha was about to connect, Ned chanted "Shifting Flow." As soon as the spell activated, he vanished into thin air, only to reappear in front of Lunoa.

"Miss Luno—Urgh!"

Misha tried to move back and support Misha, but Marty didn't let her. She thrust a knife at the catkin, who found herself completely unable to disengage. All she could manage was to push back against the knife with her dagger.

As soon as she realized she wouldn't get any help from Misha,

Lunoa stopped casting her spell midway and used another spell with no incantation.

"Air Blast!"

Ned had raised his fist to punch Lunoa, but Lunoa's squall sent him flying backward. Ned planted his feet firmly into the ground to keep his balance, shattering the stone flooring in the process. Then, he pivoted and delivered a roundhouse kick to Lunoa.

Lunoa attempted to parry with her staff, but the blow pushed her all the way to the edge of the ring. She only avoided going out of bounds because she had adopted the proper defensive posture just in time, a product of the rigorous training she had put herself through.

Still, Ned and Marty had successfully separated Misha and Lunoa. With Misha unable to find a way out of Marty's repeated attacks, Lunoa could only raise her staff once more and prepare to fend off Ned to the best of her ability.

◇

From my seat, I watched Marty and her dragonewt teammate expertly separate Lunoa and Misha.

"They're skilled," I said.

"Yep," Tida replied. "Instead of trying to deal damage from the start, they focused on separating the girls."

"Lunoa and Misha have managed to keep winning against stronger opponents because they've supported one another. Now that the opportunity to do so has been taken away from them, they won't be able to compete. The difference in individual abilities is too stark," Mireille added.

I was of the same mind. Marty and her teammate were unlikely to lose even without going out of their way to separate Misha and Lunoa, but they hadn't left anything to chance and had maximized their odds of winning.

“Oh my, I don’t remember teaching Lunoa that,” I said.

Faced with the dragonewt martial artist, Lunoa had raised her staff above her head and shrouded it in wind. This high-level technique was a step beyond the one that simply reinforced a weapon with mana, allowing the user to imbue elemental magic directly into it.

“Where in the world did she learn that?” I asked.

“She must have learned it from an adventurer,” Mireille suggested. Many adventurers used reinforcement skills and spells, so she was likely right.

“It’s still a tad sloppy, though. She isn’t going to last long,” Tida said.

Just as Tida had pointed out, the wind magic coating Luano’s staff wasn’t stable, which meant that Lunoa was expending a tremendous quantity of mana to keep it going. Sure enough, after Lunoa successfully parried a few light punches, the martial artist’s reinforced fist caused her mana to scatter. The elemental magic on her staff dispersed as Ned’s strike launched her out of bounds.

“Lunoa lost,” I said. “Let’s see how Misha fares.”

Misha, who was doing her utmost to withstand Marty’s attacks, had gradually been pushed toward the edge of the ring. Ned had finished with Lunoa, and as soon as the dragonewt joined Marty, the outcome was decided.

The experienced duo had easily defeated Lunoa and Misha, bringing their run to an end.

“Still, they put up a good fight in this tournament,” I said.

“Indeed,” Mireille agreed. “I’m still surprised they made it this far, but the luck of the draw was on their side during the early matches.”

“The way these opponents fought also proves that they didn’t look down on Misha and Lunoa,” I added. “They separated them as

soon as the match started and focused on keeping Misha in check, since she has better close-combat abilities. They didn't let Lunoa cast as much magic as she would have liked and calmly dealt with her wind-imbued staff, even though they probably didn't expect to see that technique here. Then, they cornered Misha together and finished things off."

Lunoa and Misha had been defeated quickly, but the strategy their opponents had employed demonstrated that they'd carefully studied the girls' previous matches. Lunoa and Misha had most likely done the same for their adversaries, but they hadn't been able to adapt their fighting styles accordingly. They'd been forced to rely on the one strategy they'd practiced.

"They did as well as they could have against two experienced Rank C adventurers," Tida said.

"Indeed," I replied.

Lunoa and Misha would still be a while, so we didn't leave our seats immediately.

In the meantime, Tida brought up an interesting topic. "By the way, there's a contestant everyone's talking about in the main, one-on-one tournament. Have you heard?"

"A contestant everyone is talking about?" I repeated. I hadn't been paying much attention to the main tournament. All I knew was that Mud Sistia, a Rank A adventurer who was so famous that there were plays about her, was fighting in it.

"It's a woman from Haldoria," Tida told me. "She's managed to win all of her matches so far without taking any damage!"

"Impressive," I said. "Is she an adventurer too?"

"I'm not sure. She hides her face with a mask, but the way she carries herself makes it clear she's had a good upbringing. Rumor has it she's a noble lady in disguise."

"A Haldorian noble, huh?" I said. I kept my other thoughts to myself. A name passed through my mind but I discounted the idea. I

couldn't imagine *her* joining such a tournament.

"Lunoa and Misha must be almost done with their post-match treatment. Let's go join them," I said, getting up.

"You both fought well," I said.

"Thank you," Lunoa replied.

"Thank you, Miss Ellie," Misha added.

The girls weren't as affected by their defeat as I'd expected. I took a good look at them as they each took one of Alice's hands and started walking with her, but nothing seemed off. They were behaving the same as usual. Had they gone into the match knowing that they would lose? I couldn't stop myself from asking, and the two of them glanced at one another before answering.

"That's part of the reason," Lunoa said, "but there's also the fact that we promised to draw lessons from the defeat and keep on practicing."

"We'll keep growing stronger," Misha affirmed.

"You will," I told them.

Lunoa and Misha had used to be the types to torment themselves with their mistakes endlessly, but it looked like teaming up had taught them to be more positive.

"Speaking of which, I meant to ask," I started, "Lunoa, did you learn that technique you used at the end from an adventurer?"

"I-I did. An experienced adventurer I met at the guild's training ground taught me. I still have a long way to go before I can master it, though..."

"That technique is a good fit for you," I said. "If you keep practicing, it'll become one of the strongest tools in your arsenal."

"R-Really?!"

“Yes. Body reinforcement spells, in general, are a good fit for you.”

“Body reinforcement spells? That’s unexpected,” she replied, puzzled. “I never was all that good at moving my body.”

“You may not be aware of this, but your unique spell, Item Analysis, is classified in the body reinforcement category.”

“Huh?!”

“Item Analysis is a spell that boosts your five senses, then matches the information you’ve gathered through them with the knowledge you have. As I’ve told you in the past, its effectiveness depends mostly on how much you know, but at the end of the day, strengthening your senses is strengthening your body. The fact that you can use that spell most likely means you’re naturally suited for using reinforcement techniques—especially those that enhance the senses.”

“Enhance my senses…” Lunoa said, deep in thought.

“As for you, Misha, you’re steadily improving.”

“You really think so?”

“As a catkin, you were born with flexible yet explosively powerful muscles and a light body. As long as you continue to train diligently, you will become strong. But try not to forget that your real job is that of an attendant, all right?”

“Of course! I won’t forget!”

“Anyhow, the two of you are still growing. Don’t be in a hurry, and give your talents time to bloom.”

“Yes, miss Ellie!” the two exclaimed.

Tida seemed to have been waiting for our conversation to end so she wouldn’t interrupt. “Do you have plans after this?” she asked in between bites of dried squid as she stepped closer to us.

“Well... It’s a bit early to just go home, so perhaps a meal somewhere?”

“If you don’t have anywhere specific in mind, how about coming to the Eastern Square with me? I heard merchants from the Northern Continent are putting up stalls there!”

“From what I know, Northern Continent cuisine is quite unusual, so I’m curious,” I said.

“Let’s all go, then,” Mireille said.

We walked back to the center of the city and headed toward the east. This part of the city was usually quiet, but now there were countless stalls lined up for the festival.

“What are these, mama?” Alice asked, pointing at several wooden animal figures arranged on a mat.

“I believe they make these in the Western Continent,” I said.

“Yep!” Tida exclaimed. “They’re guardian beast figures. They’re mostly made in the Western Continent, but they’re basically good luck charms crafted to resemble the thirteen guardian beasts that protected the saint of the Church of Ibris.”

“That’s quite the variety,” I commented.

“Each guardian beast has its own significance,” Tida explained. “For instance, the turtle stands for longevity, the lion for victory, the cat for business success, the bird for good harvests...”

“That’s interesting. I had no idea,” I said.

“This cultural aspect of the Western Continent isn’t very well-known here,” Tida said.

After Tida finished explaining the meaning of each guardian beast figure, we all chose one to purchase. I picked the cat, Mireille and Misha chose rabbits for good luck, Lunoa decided on the wolf for knowledge, and Alice—without a single second of hesitation—pointed at the carbuncle. According to Tida, it symbolized purity

and innocence.

“You’re not buying one, Tida?”

“I’ll pass. I whittled so many of them at the monastery that I just can’t stand them anymore...” she said with a vacant stare.

We kept walking and got to the plaza. It wasn’t as big as the central square with its fountain and clock tower, but the eastern plaza was full of vegetation. There was even a small stream running through it. Many street vendors had set up shop here for the festival. Some sold food, but there were also other goods. Just like in the other parts of the city, the stalls had been grouped together by type, and delicious smells that stirred my appetite wafted from the area with all the food stalls.

“There are a lot of dishes I’ve never seen before,” Lunoa noted.

“The Northern Continent is cold, so I’ve heard that many of their local specialties are warm soups and dishes with ginger or spicy seasonings,” Mireille said.

“There was also a lot of spicy food in the United Beast Kingdom, but these dishes don’t look similar at all,” Misha said.

“Let’s each pick the dishes that appeal most to us, so we can share,” I said.

We split up to go look at the stalls and each purchased a few things. Alice and I stumbled upon chewy bites wrapped in plant leaves. According to the vendor, this food was a staple of the eastern part of the Northern Continent. It somewhat resembled the mochi rice cakes of the Southern Continent.

“It seems that they make it by grinding a fruit called roro into a powder, mixing it with spices and water, and steaming it,” I said. We had all reconvened and were now sampling our dishes.

After eating a bit more, I noticed that this delicacy was very filling. I could see why it was a staple. The spices warmed me from the inside, and the taste was great too. Eating this food made us thirsty, though, so we had some juice that Lunoa and Misha had

bought for everyone.

“Mama! It’s fizzy!” Alice chirped.

“This was made with carbonated water,” I told her. “Is that...ginger I taste?”

“It is,” Lunoa said. “The vendor told us this was a mix of ginger extract, squeezed juice...and that thing you just mentioned, ‘carbonated water.’”

“I expected it to taste similarly to ginger tea, but it packs a lot more...*punch*,” Misha said with a grimace.

“Carbonated water is something you can find in volcanic zones. It’s mostly used by alchemists as a catalyst, but on the Northern Continent, they utilize it for an array of recipes. Once you get used to drinking it, it feels refreshing,” Mireille said.

Carbonated water didn’t seem to be Lunoa and Misha’s cup of tea, but Mireille and Tida both appeared to be enjoying their beverages. Surprisingly enough, Alice also seemed to love it. I, on the other hand, wasn’t so fond of it.

“I picked something safe,” Mireille said, showing us a bag of skewers with chicken and spring onions coated in a sweet and spicy sauce.

Tida sighed. “The alcohol-steamed dishes spoke to me more.”

The foods Tida was talking about were subject to a steaming process that involved liquor with a high alcohol content. A lot of dishes on the Nothern Continent used this technique, from popular street food to fine cuisine served at the court. Still, they weren’t very accessible to people who disliked alcohol.

“Though I guess these skewers will work great as an appetizer if I pair them with a nice drink,” Tida continued, pulling out a small bottle of alcohol that no one had seen her buy.

“Please don’t get drunk on us here,” I said.

“Don’t worry, it takes more than a tiny bottle to bring *me* down,” she said in high spirits.

After we finished eating, we browsed through the rest of the stalls. There was a little bit of everything, from wooden figures similar to the ones we’d seen before to peculiar tools whose uses I couldn’t even guess to books from the Northern Continent. I purchased a few of the books for myself.

“I cannot help but wonder about their sales strategy. Why bring technical books on magic and alchemy to this kind of market? It’s not something anyone could expect to sell well,” I said.

Books were expensive in general, but specialized ones went for even higher prices—a few dozen silver coins at minimum. For instance, the books I’d purchased had all been around three gold coins each. This wasn’t the type of item one normally sold at stalls.

“That stall didn’t only sell books,” Mireille said. “So I assume the vendor gathered every unusual item he could find and called it a day.”

“That sounds likely, but it’s still an odd choice,” I replied.

“But you did buy some of the books, didn’t you? That stall made a profit in the end,” Tida said.

“Well if you put it that way, I can’t exactly argue…”

As we were talking, the children had gathered in front of a stall. I approached and noticed it had some peculiar wares.

“What are those?” Tida asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It’s my first time seeing something like this.”

The Merchants’ Guild had approved the stall, so it couldn’t be selling anything dangerous. Still, these products—flying, colorful slimes—were strange to say the least.

“What are these?” I asked the vendor.

“They’re slime balloons,” he replied. “They’re very popular with kids right now on the Northern Continent.”

“Slime balloons? These aren’t floating due to mana, though, are they?” I asked. I’d initially thought they were magic items crafted by alchemists, but I couldn’t sense any mana emanating from them.

“It’s helium making them float.”

“Helium?” Tida repeated. “I’ve heard of that before! Alchemists make it, right?”

“Not at all,” the vendor replied. “It’s a product of *chemistry*.”

“Chemistry? What’s that?” Tida asked, puzzled.

“A branch of learning that does not involve magic,” I said. “I hear it’s studied as much as magic on the Northern Continent.”

“You’ve got that right, miss,” the vendor said. “I’m no scholar so I can’t explain the details, but if you put helium inside a thin bag made out of slime, it’ll float for a few days. Apparently, some researchers are trying to make a floating balloon big enough that it’ll be able to hold the weight of a person and take them all the way up into the sky.”

“Huh?! Fly with a balloon...? If I were me, I’d never *ever* ride it,” Tida said, furrowing her brow.

I felt the same way. Ascending into the sky with a slime balloon sounded dreadful. It didn’t even have wings.

“Anyway, I’ll purchase three,” I told the vendor. “Pick the color you like, girls.”

“Yay!” Alice squealed.

“C-Can we really have one too?” Lunoa asked.

“Thank you very much, Miss Ellie,” Misha said.

I'd read my fair share about potions and alchemy over the years, but as I watched the girls with their balloons in hand, I thought that looking into fields of study that did not involve magic seemed interesting. Lunoa, Misha and Alice looked like little tamers walking their familiars.

Today, on the fourth day of the festival, both tournaments would hold their finals. Lunoa and Misha weren't in the running anymore, but since I still had access to my box and the two wanted to watch the final matches, we headed to the venue anyway.

"Ladies and gentlemen! You've been waiting for this moment! For three days, our contestants have given their all in the ring, but the time has finally come for the best pair of this tournament to be decided!" the presenter enthusiastically announced, using wind magic to project his voice across the entire venue.

The public cheered.

"What's more, our dearest crown prince, His Highness Okyst, has decided to grace us with his presence today!" the announcer continued.

Okyst stepped to the edge of his box and waved to the crowd.

"Thank you so much, Your Highness!" the presenter said. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, let the final match of the pair tournament begin!"

"It's starting!" Lunoa exclaimed.

"Do you think Miss Marty will win?" Misha asked her, just as excited.

Their eyes were glued to the contestants as they walked toward the ring. The final would pit Marty and Ned, the pair who had bested Lunoa and Misha, against two mercenaries who belonged to the same corp as each other. After taking up their positions in the ring, the four of them and the referee bowed in Okyst's direction. Then, the referee signaled for the fight to commence.

The four combatants jumped into action at the same time, but they all made different choices. Marty lowered her body before dashing forward in a straight line to close the distance between her and her opponents. Ned strengthened his body with mana and took a roundabout path to the right. On the opposing side, one of the mercenaries, Lanz, readied his large shield while dropping his center of gravity. His teammate, Cain, dual-wielded his swords in an underhanded grip and engaged Marty. While Lanz expertly blocked Ned's kicks and punches, Cain parried Marty's knife with his blades.

"These mercenaries are strong," I commented.

"They're constantly covering each other's blind spots and positioning themselves in a way that would allow them to assist one another if necessary," Misha said.

"They didn't take the bait Miss Marty and Mr. Ned presented either," Lunoa added.

The mercenaries looked very much used to fighting as a pair. Marty and Ned put up a good fight, but the match eventually ended with a victory for Lanz and Cain. Now that the pair tournament was over, it was time for the final of the main tournament. As I'd expected, the public was far more enthusiastic for that battle.

"Let's welcome our finalists!" the presenter roared. "First, the favorite of the competition—the Rank A adventurer Sistia!"

A woman with tied-back reddish-brown hair emerged as the screams and cheers of the crowd resounded throughout the stands.

"Miss Lunoa! It's Mud Sistia!" Misha squealed.

"In the flesh!!!" Lunoa giggled.

The two of them had become Sistia's fans after watching a play about her, and they often read about her adventures to Alice. As a result, the little girl was just as excited as they were.

"Let's now welcome her opponent, this tournament's dark horse! It's the elusive, masked whip user...Rose!"

I choked on my tea.

“Mama!”

“Miss Ellie?!”

“Are you all right?!”

The three girls fussed over me, but I quickly reassured them in between coughs. “I’m fine, don’t worry.” I’d been so surprised that my tea had ended up going down the wrong pipe.

“Here, Miss Ellie,” Mireille said calmly, handing me a small towel.

I wiped my mouth as Mireille gently patted my back. As she did so, she leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

“That’s Lady Roselia, right?”

“It’s most definitely her,” I replied. She’d put on a mask and was posing as an adventurer, but there was no way I’d ever mistake her for someone else.

“But why would she take part in this tournament?” Mireille asked.

“I don’t know. She never enjoyed making a spectacle of herself, so I’m all the more confused.”

I looked down at the ring and my eyes met hers beyond the mask. After staring straight at me for a moment, she turned her gaze to her opponent.

Sistia moved almost in unison with the referee’s signal. She had a composite attribute, mud—a mix of water and earth—and one of her favorite spells was Mud Doll. In theory, the best way to fight a sorcerer who used golems and similar spells was to take them out swiftly, *before* they could summon their creations. Needless to say, Roselia knew that too, but she stayed put and calmly observed Sistia, allowing her to create three Mud Dolls.

“You sure look composed,” Sistia said, slightly annoyed by Roselia’s attitude.

She sent her dolls to attack Roselia. Each of the mud golems was roughly two meters tall, and they all swung their fists at Roselia at once. In that moment, Roselia pulled on the whip that hung at her hip and twirled it, her motion compact and controlled. It cut through the air quicker than the speed of sound and precisely hit the mana clusters that kept the golems together, destroying them. But Sistia wouldn’t let herself be defeated so easily. While the first three golems had taken up Roselia’s attention, she’d crafted two more that were shaped like wolves and were bigger than a human.

“Fire Whip,” Roselia chanted. Flames enveloped her whip.

The spell she’d used normally created a whip made of fire, but by superposing it exactly over her physical whip, Roselia could dramatically increase its power—or so I assumed. The speed at which she wielded it was far superior to any other Fire Whip I’d seen before, and she demolished one of the wolves in the blink of an eye. The other mud beast jumped at her from behind, baring sharp fangs.

Roselia huffed while kicking the lupine golem in the face. She used that kick to propel herself into the air and she dodged the wolf’s fangs while swinging her whip.

“Whoops!” Sistia let out, contorting her upper body to evade Roselia’s whip. Immediately after, she lifted her right hand and directed her palm at Roselia. “Mud Bullet,” she chanted.

Roselia dodged the small pellets of mud, but earthen snakes rose from the spots where they’d hit the ground, slithering toward Roselia and entwining themselves around her legs.

“I’ve got you!” Sistia exclaimed. “Mud Goliath!”

A gargantuan arm made of mud appeared in front of Sistia and swung at Roselia. This was Sistia’s most famous finishing move, the one that often came up in plays and tales about her. While I couldn’t see Roselia’s expression, I could tell from her body

language that she was still just as relaxed as at the start of the match.

“Flame Circle,” she said. Flames danced under Roselia’s feet and swiftly expanded into a circle. Soon, a pillar of fire erupted from the circle, engulfing the snakes—and Roselia—in its burning inferno.

“What?! She’s burning herself?!”

Roselia had most likely built a resistance to her own flames. She emerged from the blazes unhurt. The mud snakes, on the other hand, had been entirely stripped of their moisture. The hardened lumps of earth clattered to the ground. Without wasting a single moment, Roselia let her whip hit the floor of the ring.

“Slithering Aitvaras,” Roselia chanted. A slender flame progressed across the ring, melting the stone as it went.

“Mud Ball!” Sistia protected her body with a large sphere of mud before the fire could reach her. Soon after, the conflagration covered the ball.

Roselia turned on her heel and started walking away, as though she’d already won the fight. When the fire disappeared and the mud cracked apart to reveal Sistia, the adventurer was unconscious. She fell to the ground with a thud. Although she’d managed to fend off the flames and hadn’t suffered any burns, the lack of oxygen had gotten to her in the end.

The referee announced the victor.

“I still can’t believe she decided to compete…” I whispered.

“Miss Ellie.”

“Yes, I’m aware. We should get away from here.”

We didn’t wait for the awards ceremony to start before getting up and leaving. As we passed near the betting slip sales window, I spotted Tida. She was on her knees, crying. Seeing this wouldn’t be good for Alice’s education, so I purposefully ignored her and hurried along before the children could notice.

◇

That night,as I got ready to pour myself a glass of wine before bed, I saw a light from my window.

I gasped and immediately jumped back, getting away from the window, but nothing happened. The light didn’t grow stronger and simply swayed gently outside. I didn’t sense any danger, but still approached my window with caution. When I opened it, I finally understood what the source of the illumination was. There was a bird made of fire, small enough to fit into my palm.

“It’s not alive. And that mana is…” I whispered as I watched the bird settle on my windowsill and look up at me.

Having recognized the mana, I put on my coat and jumped through the window. The bird followed me down and began leading the way. I followed it. Ten minutes later, I found myself in a large park in the center of the capital. This park was usually bustling with people, but in the middle of the night, there wasn’t a soul in sight. As a result, I immediately noticed *her* aura—not that she was doing anything to conceal it.

“It’s been a long time, Elizabeth,” said a voice as a familiar silhouette sprang from the shadows.

“Roselia.”

The bird that had led me here stopped on her arm. She shook it once and the mana dispersed into the darkness.

“To think you’d invite me here in the dead of the night. What for?” I asked.

“You know that already, don’t you?” Roselia looked tired. She sat down on a bench.

“Congratulations on winning the tournament,” I told her. “You completely dominated that Rank A adventurer. It was most impressive.”

“When did you master sarcasm? You know full well it just so happened to be an easy matchup for me. Her abilities are far better suited for fighting groups, and she’s more of a support sorcerer anyway. Since I’m a mid-range offensive sorcerer, it’s only natural that I won.”

Roselia was as straitlaced as ever, and she had answered my casual comment seriously. I supposed it was time to breach the main topic.

“If you’re here for the same reason as my brother, it’s no use. I don’t intend to give up,” I said, sitting down on the bench as well but leaving space between us.

Come to think of it, Roselia and I had known each other for a long time. We’d sat across from one another and spent time together in the past, but I had a feeling that this was the very first time we had sat together facing the same direction.

“I cannot say I know what you’re going through, but I do empathize with your feelings. Leaving that idiotic prince aside, you devoted your time, body, and soul to the crown, yet the king never so much as thought to extend a helping hand to you. Your father discarded you out of loyalty to the royal family, and the people you’d done so much for were ready to throw stones at you because of a few rumors. I might have wanted to forsake the kingdom too if that had happened to me.”

“Then this conversation is over.” I was about to get up when Roselia stopped me.

“Wait,” she said. “Now that we’ve established that I *do* understand you,” she continued, “Allow me to say one thing. Stop sacrificing unrelated, innocent people.”

“I’ve long since decided to stop concerning myself with the people of the kingdom,” I replied. “I have no intention of targeting them *specifically*. But if they must be collateral damage, then so be it. I will not hesitate to use them either if it furthers my plans. That is all. It’s not like I swore to massacre every last citizen of the kingdom.”

“Are you serious? For the sake of your goals, you don’t mind trampling on innocents? Are you aware you’ve become exactly like the selfish nobles you used to despise?”

“So what?” I retorted. “My opponent is Bulat the God of Thunder. I’ll never defeat him if I stick to frontal attacks. Destroying his country beforehand is simply sound, logical planning.”

“No, all you have to do is join Her Highness Adel! Her goal is to get rid of Bulat and Friede and ascend to the throne! If you were to help her, think of how easily that could be achieved. And Her Highness would clear your name, you know that!”

“That’s a very kind offer,” I said. “I genuinely believe that.”

“Then—”

I didn’t let Roselia finish. “But I still don’t wish to return to that country.”

“In that case, can’t you simply promise that you won’t hurt the people anymore?”

“As I keep telling you, that is impossible.”

“If you don’t stop, you are the one who will end up suffering, Elizabeth,” Roselia said.

I remained silent.

“You’ve always been close to the people!” Roselia continued. “And yet here you are, betraying them.”

“They betrayed me first…”

“So if you’re betrayed, you betray in return? That’s the logic of the *weak*. All the feeble can do is devote every effort to protecting themselves and their own. Therefore, they cannot afford to forgive. But what about you, Elizabeth? Are you weak? You’re not. You never were. You’re *strong*, strong enough to laugh in the faces of those who’d betray you. So why are you acting like a weakling? I can forgive casting away your responsibilities as one who was born powerful, but I draw the line at pretending to be weak.”

Roselia was practically quoting Her Majesty Gyokuryou at me. Adel’s mother was the one who had once explained this concept to us.

“I heard you adopted a young orphan,” Roselia said after a pause. “Her name is Alice, right? Is she dear to you?”

“Of course she is,” I replied.

“How would you feel if she died?”

“Are you threatening me?” I shot back, letting bloodlust and mana seep out of my body.

Roselia didn’t even flinch. She shook her head as though what I’d suggested was the stupidest idea in the world.

“Ridiculous. You know I would never do that,” she said. She paused for a moment. “Seventeen.”

“Seventeen?”

“That’s the number of children who died at the hands of Robert Arty when he went on a rampage. That was your doing, wasn’t it? Speaking of which, eighty-six children died during the uprising in Baron Lockit’s territory. And at least twice as many became orphans after that. Can you still insist that these sacrifices were necessary? Are you like your father, who only ever looks at the lives of people in terms of cold, hard numbers?”

“I—” I jumped to my feet and glared at Roselia, but I couldn’t get any more words to come out.

I'd intentionally refused to look the truth in the eye. At that moment, I hadn't cared in the slightest. I had genuinely believed that no matter what happened to the people who'd betrayed me, it wasn't my problem anymore. But ever since Alice had come into my life, my resolve had started to waver. I didn't want to stop seeking revenge, but I was starting to wonder if sacrificing children and innocents for its sake was truly worth it.

"Deep down, you already know I'm right," Roselia continued. "But you can't allow yourself to change your mind now because you know that if you do, you won't be able to justify the sacrifices you've made so far. I can tell, Elizabeth. You're thinking of taking your own life to expiate once you're done exacting revenge, aren't you?"

I looked at her, stunned, and Roselia gestured for me to sit back down. I did.

"You're too kind to become truly evil," she said. "You're more than smart enough to talk your way out of this conversation, but here you are, unable to even answer me. That's all the proof anyone could ever need."

Roselia let out a deep sigh. "What a clumsy girl you are."

◆

Roselia made her way to the royal palace in accordance with the summon she'd received. When she arrived, the attendants showed her to a room. As soon as she walked through the door, she caught a glimpse of a very familiar silhouette calmly sipping on a cup of tea.

"Good day to you, Lady Roselia," Elizabeth greeted her with a smile.

"Likewise..." Roselia replied.

As always, Elizabeth's manners were those of a picture-perfect young lady, and as always, Roselia hated that polished, *fake* smile of hers. Roselia knew full well that Elizabeth's behavior befitted her station. Roselia too had received an education worthy of a high-born noble lady and could adopt the same mannerisms at the drop of a hat if necessary. The difference between the two women, however, was that Elizabeth had nothing else but that faux smile. She was a marionette with no mind of her own, a doll carefully crafted to further the interests of the kingdom and of the royal family. That was how Roselia saw her.

Roselia was different. *She* had given herself the goal of standing above all of the other ladies in the kingdom, and *she* had decided to make every effort to achieve her ambitions. Elizabeth, on the other hand, simply obeyed her father's orders. And yet, Roselia still couldn't win against her. That fact profoundly hurt her pride.

"I thought you were away from the capital, Lady Elizabeth," Roselia said.

"I returned yesterday."

"If I'm not mistaken, you were at Lamposa Fortress, were you not?"

"Indeed. We overcame a critical predicament thanks to a joint effort by everyone."

Lamposa Fortress was one of the strongholds Haldoria used to

monitor a forest inhabited by countless powerful monsters. Whenever these creatures ventured out of the forest, the guards stationed at the fortress slew them. Usually, that strategy worked out fine, but a few days prior, a large number of monsters had emerged from the forest all at once. The fortress had almost fallen, but Elizabeth had taken command and swiftly restored order, pushing back the horde.

"I'm most grateful to you, Lady Roselia," Elizabeth added. "The way you took care of the supply lines and sent us additional weapons and medicine was very helpful."

"I did not do it for you. I did it for the good of the kingdom," Roselia replied. "Anyhow, tell me, what happened with the monsters?"

"While I bought time for him, His Majesty fought on the front line."

"I see."

"With His Majesty on the battlefield, ninety percent of the fifteen thousand monsters that attacked the fortress were defeated in less than a day," Elizabeth said.

"As expected of him. Only His Majesty could turn the tide of a battle alone like that," Roselia replied. "Don't you think he could triumph over the empire all on his own?"

"That's impossible," Elizabeth replied. "If he ventured too deep within their territory, the grand master of the Imperial Knights would appear."

"That was a joke. We've finally signed an armistice; I wouldn't want to reignite the war."

Roselia and Elizabeth continued to discuss rather ominous topics while sharing tea together to kill the time. Roselia still didn't know why she'd been called to the palace, but she was almost certain it had something to do with the selection of the crown prince's princess. At the moment, the prince's fiancée was Elizabeth, but

other candidates were still in the running. Elizabeth had been named Friede's fiancée at birth, but there was nothing definitive about that. After all, no one could have known whether she'd actually grow into a woman worthy of being the future queen, or if she'd even make it to adulthood at all. As a result, there had always been several candidates—and Roselia was the number one among them.

"Do you know why we've been summoned?" Roselia asked.

"No. All I know is that the person who called for us is Her Majesty Gyokuryou," Elizabeth said, still smiling. Her voice was unhurried and her expression relaxed.

"I see you're not worried in the slightest. Do you think you have nothing to fear from me?"

"Not at all. I live in constant worry of the day you'll surpass me.

Roselia sighed. "I'm not sure I believe that."

"I apologize for the wait, my ladies. Her Majesty will see you now," said Gyokuryou's waiting maid.

Roselia and Elizabeth stood up. They both expected to walk to the queen's office or to a drawing room, but surprisingly enough, the waiting maid led them to a small courtroom in the basement of the palace. This was where cases that involved nobles were usually adjudicated, as well as ones that weren't serious enough for the king to judge the culprit directly but which still required the input of the royal family.

Inside the courtroom was a beautiful woman with long, lustrous black hair tied in a chignon. She sat at the highest, most important seat. Ever since the death of Bulat's first wife, Gyokuryou had held the status of the most noble lady in the kingdom. She was an exquisite beauty born from a branch of the imperial family that ruled over the Reki Empire on the Southern Continent. Roselia and Elizabeth immediately bowed to her.

“Be at ease, you two,” Gyokuryou said. After gesturing for the two young ladies to sit down, she finally informed them of the reason they had been summoned. “We shall now begin the trial. Pay attention, for I will ask each of you to give me your thoughts on what punishment befits the crimes of the accused. Be aware that this is a test to evaluate which one of you should become the crown princess.”

After Roselia and Elizabeth nodded, Gyokuryou called out to the guard standing by the door. “Bring the accused in.”

Roselia couldn’t hold back a gasp as she saw the accused. It was a girl who looked younger than she and Elizabeth. Her wrists were manacled and a soldier dragged her in, pulling on a rope that was connected to her handcuffs.

“What are the charges?” Gyokuryou asked.

A civil official who’d remained quiet so far started reading from the documents in front of him.

“The accused, Aria from the village of Hazard, works as a maidservant for House Lientar. She has been brought to face justice for attempting to murder her employer, the head of House Lientar, Viscount Dominic Lientar, with a kitchen knife. She was apprehended by the viscount’s personal guards and restrained after wounding him.”

“Aria, I grant you the right to speak,” Gyokuryou said. “Explain why you attacked Viscount Lientar.”

The soldier removed the gag that prevented the girl from speaking. She immediately began to sob.

“That...bastard! He...my sister!”

Her face was twisted with rage, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She wept so intensely that it was hard to make out her words, but as she kept trying to explain, Roselia eventually got the gist. Apparently, the viscount often hired pretty commoner girls as maids to do with as he pleased. Aria’s sister had a fiancé, and she’d

refused to work for Lientar. In the end, she'd been dragged away—kidnapped as per her sister's words—only for her lifeless body to be returned a few days later.

"Dominic's servants claim she died in an accident, but that's a lie!" the girl wailed. "He killed her! He beat her black and blue! We saw her body... We saw it!" She broke down and sobbed harder than ever.

"Now, her motive is clear—revenge. Roselia, how do you believe she should be punished?" Gyokuryou asked.

Roselia flinched at the sudden question. What the viscount had done was unforgivable. However, he was a noble man and that girl was a commoner. Their difference in status couldn't be overlooked.

"I... Um... I believe that...in light of the circumstances, ten years in prison followed by the rest of her lifetime spent in a convent would be appropriate," Roselia replied, her closed fists trembling.

While Aria hadn't actually killed the viscount, she'd attempted to and she'd hurt him—a nobleman—in the process. Roselia knew that the punishment she had proposed was far from severe enough for the crime, but she couldn't bring herself to suggest anything harsher.

"All right. What are your views on the matter, Elizabeth?" Gyokuryou asked.

"A commoner attempted to kill a nobleman. She cannot escape the death penalty. However, out of consideration for the circumstances, I suggest cutting off her ties with her family entirely before passing down the sentence."

If a commoner was found guilty of attempting to murder a noble, not only would they face the death penalty, but so would their family. If Aria was removed from the family register, however, the rest of her family would be spared. Roselia clenched her teeth. Elizabeth was right. Her own suggestion had been far too soft considering the existing laws.

And yet she couldn't stop herself interjecting. "Y-Your Majesty! Lady Elizabeth is correct that this is what the law demands, but we cannot ignore the circumstances and—"

Gyokuryou lifted one hand and Roselia immediately shut her mouth.

"We must consider the circumstances, indeed," Gyokuryou said.

"In that case—" Roselia began, only to be cut off once again by Gyokuryou.

"However, there is no proof."

Roselia gasped.

"Your name is Aria, correct?" Gyokuryou continued. "Do you have any proof Viscount Lientar did anything at all to your sister?"

"I... I don't."

Gyokuryou sighed. "My decision is made. Aria, you are hereby sentenced to death for the attempted murder of a nobleman. However, I shall agree to have you removed from your family's registry. This matter is now settled."

Having passed her judgment, Gyokuryou stood up and turned on her heel. Everyone, including Roselia and Elizabeth, bowed in deference until she'd left the room. Roselia could hear the poor girl bawling uncontrollably, but she couldn't bring herself to talk to her. Elizabeth glanced at Roselia before walking up to the girl. She whispered something in her ear and the girl's eyes widened in surprise. Then, she bowed deeply to Elizabeth before being hauled away by the soldier who'd brought her in.

A few days later, Gyokuryou summoned Roselia and Elizabeth to the palace once again to witness Aria's execution. While Gyokuryou's waiting maid usually guided them through the palace whenever the queen called for them, it was a prison guard who showed up this time. The two young ladies followed him. They'd expected to be taken to the usual execution site, but instead ended

up in an underground room next to the cells.

“We’re not going to the execution site,” Roselia noted, slightly confused.

“Her Majesty has mercifully decided not to make her execution a spectacle. Only we and a few officials will witness it,” Elizabeth replied.

“I see...”

The two women waited for a few moments, then the guards brought Aria into the room. She wore simple yet clean clothes, and her complexion looked better than it had a few days ago. That was because Roselia had talked to the guards and insisted she be given decent clothes and meals. She knew it was hypocritical of her at this point, but she had felt she needed to do something to make the girl’s last days more tolerable.

The executioner poured Aria a cup of poisoned alcohol and handed it to her. Under normal circumstances, Aria would have been brought to the execution site in the square next to the palace, forced up the scaffold under the eyes of the public, and decapitated. The fact that she’d been given poisoned alcohol—like a noble would have—meant that either Gyokuryou had taken pity on her, or that Elizabeth had used her own influence just like Roselia.

Aria took the goblet and looked at Elizabeth, who nodded at her. Aria seemed satisfied. She brought the cup to her lips and drank its contents in one gulp. Before long, the young girl closed her eyes. She looked as though she were just sleeping, and just like that, her short life ended. A few soldiers entered to take away the body, and Roselia asked them to handle it with care. Then, she and Elizabeth left the room.

“Lady Elizabeth,” Roselia started. “Do you believe this was for the best?”

“It was,” Elizabeth replied. “No matter what her motive was, that girl broke the law. It’s only natural that she was judged for doing so.”

“Yet the noble who caused all of this still roams free, unafraid of judgment…”

“Didn’t Her Majesty go over this already? Without proof, the law cannot judge anyone.”

“But—”

“I apologize, Lady Roselia, but I have much to do. I shall take my leave.”

“Lady Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth walked away without looking back despite Roselia’s protests.

A week had passed since Aria’s execution. After learning from an official that the girl had been buried in one of the communal graveyards handled by the government, Roselia headed to the cemetery at night. Even though she was only an alternate, Roselia was still in the running to become the crown princess. As such, she couldn’t be seen visiting the grave of a criminal. That was why she had only told a few servants she trusted before leaving. Accompanied only by her waiting maid, who also doubled as her bodyguard, Roselia advanced stealthily. The sky was dark already, and their only source of light was the lantern held by Roselia’s waiting maid.

“It should be around here,” Roselia said.

As they got closer to the area the civil official had told her about, Roselia noticed another light. Someone was standing in front of a grave, a lantern in their hand. Behind them were two other people. They all wore hoods and looked incredibly suspicious.

Before Roselia could figure out what was going on, her waiting maid threw her lantern to the ground and unsheathed a dagger, pulling Roselia close behind her.

“Stay behind me, my lady! I smell blood in the air!”

“What?!” Roselia yelped.

Suddenly one of the hooded figures called out to her.

“Lady Roselia?” The woman who’d just spoken removed her hood.

“Lady Elizabeth?” said Roselia, baffled.

In front of her was Elizabeth. The young woman glanced at her two companions, and they also removed their hoods. Roselia recognized the first as Mireille, Elizabeth’s waiting maid, but she’d never met the other. He was a burly man with a rough appearance.

Roselia’s waiting maid lowered her dagger with a relieved sigh.

“Why are you here?” Roselia asked.

“I came to fulfill my promise to this girl,” Elizabeth answered.

“Your promise?”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said, looking down.

Roselia followed her gaze and gasped. Several freshly severed heads were lined up at the foot of the gravestone. She recognized one of them—it was the head of an obese man.

“Viscount Lientar...” she whispered.

“I swore to her that I’d bring the heads of those who had wronged her to her grave.”

“But you said that without proof, no one could be judged...”

“I believe I mentioned the *law* in that sentence,” Elizabeth corrected.

“These guys were just unlucky,” said the brawny man next to Elizabeth. “Got attacked by *robbers* on their way back to the viscounty. Happens, right? Anyway, you’ll forget what you’ve seen here today, won’t you, little miss?”

“Barl, don’t be rude. You’re talking to the young lady of House Fadgal. I’m terribly sorry, Lady Roselia; our companion was most impolite to you,” Mireille said.

“I-It’s all right.”

Roselia was a little taken aback. Having seen Mireille apologize like that, she got the feeling that it wasn’t the first time the burly man had disrespected nobles—and that it wasn’t the first time Elizabeth and Mireille had found themselves in his company doing who knows what.

“Lady Elizabeth, do you often…” Roselia trailed off.

“Sorry?”

“No, forget it. It’s nothing.”

Roselia chose not to push the matter further. Elizabeth tilted her head in confusion, but she didn’t ask for clarification either.

“Anyhow, the time has come for us to take our leave,” Elizabeth said.

The man crammed the severed heads into a big bag, and the three of them left.

On that day, Roselia learned that Elizabeth, someone she had thought lived for and by the rules, had another side to her. She hadn’t hesitated to dirty her own hands to avenge a commoner girl—and a criminal at that.

“I still don’t think I’ve lost,” Roselia whispered. “Besides, if you have it in you…”

Roselia looked at the viscount’s blood at the foot of the gravestone. Would it disappear, sucked into the soil, by the morning?

“…can’t you live for yourself a little?”

“My lady?”

“Never mind.”

Roselia set the flowers she’d brought Aria on the ground and turned around. She took a few steps before looking over her shoulder. She snapped her fingers and fire consumed the blood, evaporating every last drop. Roselia’s eyes lingered on the scorched patch of earth for a moment before she left the scene.

◇

“I shall personally give you a reason to agree to my request,” Roselia said.

She reached into her pouch and pulled out a big case. It was at least one meter wide—far too large to ever fit inside the small pouch. The bag must have been a magic item.

Roselia placed the case down in between us.

“You know I’m engaged, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do. To the son of a margrave, if I remember correctly.”

“This is something I received when I got engaged,” Roselia said, opening the case.

“That’s?!” My voice couldn’t hide my surprise.

Inside the case was a horn. Despite being wrapped in a special type of paper that could contain mana, the horn shone with a faint gleam. Roselia gestured for me to touch it, so I reached out my hand.

“There is no mistaking it,” I said. “This is the horn of a thunder dragon—not any subspecies of dragon, a *real* dragon.”

“If you agree to sign a magic contract stipulating that you will not hurt innocent people in your quest for revenge, I shall give you this horn.”

“This is—”

“Something that you’ll absolutely need in the future,” Roselia finished for me. “I’m giving you the horn *and* a reason to not hurt the people. Not a bad deal, right? To be honest, I would have loved to add a few more conditions to make sure you won’t hinder Her Highness in any way, but too many conditions tend to render magic contracts useless.” The corners of Roselia’s mouth turned upward. “So, what do you say?”

“Roselia, do you understand what giving this to me means?”

“Of course I do.”

The horns of thunder dragons held considerable quantities of thunder mana. If I processed this correctly, I could turn it into a weapon powerful enough to work on Bulat, even if he used Thunder Spiritification.

“I’m just surprised,” I said. “Even if you serve Adel now, I always believed you were loyal to the kingdom.”

I’d always thought that Roselia was similar to my past self. I assumed she’d accepted the position as Friede’s aide—and had eventually decided to serve Adel—because as a noblewoman, she had a duty to do everything in her power to serve her country.

“What prompted this change of heart?” I asked.

Hesitation flickered in Roselia’s eyes and she paused, but she answered nonetheless. “Before I departed for the empire, I had an audience with the king. I asked him what his plans were for the future.”

“What did Bulat say?”

“That since Her Highness can control the prince, he’ll make sure Friede retains his status and he’ll allow him to live out his life in the palace.”

“That’s so naive of him,” I said.

“Very naive indeed,” Roselia agreed.

That idiotic prince had already committed far too many crimes to be given such leniency. If the kingdom were to pull itself back up, it would be crucial to first root out corruption, and then to pin everything that had gone wrong onto Friede before cutting him off. That was most likely Adel's plan.

"The fearsome God of Thunder is also just a father in the end," Roselia said. "He can't bring himself to give up on his darling son, especially since Friede has inherited the mana he's so proud of. When I heard the king's response, I made up my mind. As things stand, protecting the kingdom means cutting off its head."

"In other words, you've given up on the current kingdom."

"Indeed. I shall make sure that King Bulat is removed so that Her Highness may sit on the throne in his stead. That is why I have no intention of stopping your plots *against him*."

Putting it differently, Roselia had every intention of opposing me if I tried to involve Adel's people in my schemes. Making enemies out of Adel, Roselia, and my brother all at once sounded like a terribly unwise idea.

"All right," I said. "I shall accept your proposal."

◆

Eiwass was sitting in one of the lounges that had been given to the Haldorian delegation, organizing and reading over documents, when someone waved a piece of paper in front of his face. He looked up and met Roselia's eyes.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Our most important mission for this trip," she replied.

Eiwass took the paper from her and looked it over. It was a magic contract. As he read through it, surprise took hold of his features. Elizabeth had sworn not to involve the masses anymore.

"How did you manage this?"

He'd been convinced that the negotiations with his stubborn, uncompromising younger sister would be long and arduous. It wasn't often that Eiwass found himself genuinely astonished, but this was one of these times.

"How I got her to sign it is our little secret," Roselia said. "But now that she has, she should stop causing us so much trouble."

"Does that mean Elizabeth is ready to wash her hands of Haldoria entirely?"

"No, not at all. In fact, it's the opposite. Now that hurting the masses isn't an option anymore, she'll attack the kingdom itself—or rather, the royal family."

Roselia's words could easily have been taken as lese-majeste, but Eiwass started laughing as though he couldn't hold himself back.

"You're tougher than I thought," he told Roselia.

"Isn't that what nobility is all about?"

"Thanks to you, we won't have to worry about Elizabeth anymore. You've done a wonderful job."

"You say that, but you would have been pleased either way, wouldn't you?" Roselia's gaze turned sharp. "Elizabeth yielding means you get to return home with a distinguished feat under your belt. But even if she hadn't, you simply would have used her to take down the royal family. You wouldn't have cared even if Her Highness got dragged into it. You've always planned to catch everyone off guard so you can reap the benefits in the end, haven't you?"

Eiwass chuckled. "What a bountiful imagination you have, Lady Roselia. Let's assume you're right for a moment. I'm sworn to serve Her Highness Adel. Don't you think I would step in to shield her if the situation demanded it?

"Sure, let's pretend you would," Roselia replied. "I do have another question, though. What was the point of me participating in the tournament?"

“Well, it was fun, wasn’t it?”

“You told me to do it so I could make contact with Elizabeth, but I never needed to fight in order to do that, did I?”

“Ha ha ha! Who knows? I’m afraid I can’t recall that particular conversation anymore.”

Roselia sighed at his frivolity. The way he sounded like a playboy chatting up girls no matter what he was saying annoyed her to no end. The scariest thing about him, Roselia thought, was that this entire persona of his was fake. That carefree facade was his way of concealing his real thoughts.

“Since the matter is settled, we shall change our plans. We will depart tomorrow morning and return to the kingdom,” Eiwass declared.

“What?! But we have a luncheon with Prince Okyst and a meeting at the empire’s Merchants’ Guild planned!”

“I’ll cancel them.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about the meetings; I’ll take care of them. Just get ready to depart.”

“You have no intention of listening to my opinion on the matter, do you?”

“Oh, I’m happy to listen,” Eiwass said. “But I can’t promise that’ll make me change my mind.”

“I see. I shall take my leave, then. I have to go pack, you see,” Roselia shot back. She turned away abruptly and left the room.

After returning to the bedroom she’d been allocated, Roselia changed before ordering all the maids to leave.

She sighed. “At least I managed to convince her. And I got to see

Lord Eiwass dumbstruck. It wasn't such a terrible day."

She put the magic contract she'd signed with Elizabeth inside a small box and closed the lock with a spell before putting it away in her magic bag. The face of her former rival popped into her mind. Elizabeth had become quite different compared to the days when she had kept that annoying fake smile plastered on her face. She'd seemed a lot more human now. Today, for the first time, Roselia had seen emotions on her face, and she liked this new Elizabeth a lot better.

"You finally got away from your idiot father and the royal family. I wish you could just forget about them and focus on living your life." Roselia sighed again. "What a troublesome girl you are, Ellie."

◇

As soon as I arrived at my residence, I carefully studied the thunder dragon horn Roselia had given me. Unlike dragonkind monsters like drakes and similar beings, real dragons were a race of tremendously powerful and intelligent creatures. The material that had been used to craft Flügel also came from the body of one such being—a heavenly dragon. According to legend, a hero of old had obtained this material after slaying a heavenly dragon that had destroyed an entire nation by itself.

"I don't know how she got her hands on this, but with such a precious component, I could finally craft a weapon that could slay Bulat," I whispered, putting the horn back inside the case and stowing it inside my Grimoire of Mammon. "The main issue will be finding an artisan skilled enough to work on something like this."

The contract I'd signed would force me to amend my plans considerably. However, obtaining an item that would help me fight Bulat made it all worthwhile. With my current financial and military power, I could topple the kingdom if I truly put my mind to it. However, no matter how I went about it, there was no way I could slay Bulat myself. Even if I turned the royal capital into a blazing inferno and had armies massacre every last Haldorian soldier, I'd lose the moment Bulat and I clashed. That was how

starkly different our levels were.

“Even if giving me the horn was Roselia’s independent decision, Adel must have found out about it. But she didn’t stop Roselia, which means she thinks that me having the horn will benefit her in the long run.”

In other words, Adel was hoping I’d get rid of Bulat for her. This wasn’t her supporting me, though. We were both using one another for the sake of our personal goals.

“If that’s how you’re going to play, Adel, I shall use you too.”

A new plan began to form in my mind.

“I’m too kind, huh? You’re the last person who should be saying that, Rose.”

◇◆☆◆◇

A few minutes away from the center of the capital lies a building that used to house a theater. Nowadays, this building is a museum that exhibits

historically and culturally significant artifacts. In this museum, which is directly managed by the Dukedom of Haldoria, one can admire clothes from the Southern Continent worn by the last queen of the Kingdom of Haldoria, Adel Haldoria, or read pages from the precious memoirs written by the first archduke of the dukedom, Lucas Lebrick Haldoria. Among the priceless collection, two items are especially well guarded, both of them being rapiers. No one knows whether there is truth to these rumors, but many say they once belonged to the famous Silver Witch. The first, the Winged Blade, is sharp enough to slice through mithril as easily as if it were butter, yet is thinner than any other blade. The other, the Thunder God's Bane, is said to be able to cut through lightning itself. Despite the security around these items, word has it that they're nothing but replicas. The real ones are rumored to have either been passed down to the Silver Witch's successor or hidden under the royal palace. Our editorial team contacted the museum, and while they insisted that the swords being displayed are the real deal, they refused to allow the expert we hired to inspect them due to 'safeguarding reasons.' Are they trying to hide something? Well, only you, dear reader, can decide what to believe!

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Chapter 3: Viciousness

Even in the imperial capital, there was a place that the watchful eyes of the guards could not reach—the slums. There, the laws of the empire held no bearing, and those who inhabited this place all knew that their fates depended not on the government but on the leaders who ruled the underworld.

In a corner of this lawless place, a man stood inside a dilapidated building, concealing his presence as well as he could while holding his breath. This man, Spider, belonged to an organization that had tasked him with a mission. It was for the sake of completing this very mission—disposing of several people—that he found himself lying low in the ruins of this building. Suddenly, someone kicked open the door and several men rushed in, surrounding Spider.

“You’re the guy who’s been hanging around here a lot these days, aren’t you?” one of the men asked.

Spider didn’t reply.

“This building’s part of the Gateau Family’s territory. If you’re gonna squat here, you’d better be ready to pay u—” The man froze and stopped speaking.

These men were just common hooligans who’d come to extort someone who they thought was an insignificant vagabond looking for shelter. What they hadn’t expected, however, was to see several men tied up with spider threads in a corner of the room.

The thugs began to realize that they’d stuck their noses somewhere they shouldn’t have. This “vagabond” was dangerous. For the man who’d spoken, this realization came too late. An expression of anguish marred his features a second before his severed head hit the ground.

The others screamed in horror. One of them fell to the ground as fear gripped his heart and his legs gave out under him. From that angle, he could see the threads already intertwined around his friends’ necks.

Spider looked at the intruders with a frigid, annoyed gaze.

“Stop screeching so loudly, you worthless worms.”

The man on the ground let out a choked groan as he watched his comrades contort in pain. He too would soon end up like that—a headless cadaver.

“No... Please... Spare—” The man never finished his sentence. His consciousness had been snuffed out.

An elven man emerged from the darkness, stepping into the puddle of fresh blood with a squelching noise.

“My, my. That was quite the flashy display,” he said, exasperated.

Spider ignored him and extended one of his threads, looping it around the elf’s neck. However, before it could do him any harm, the thread burst into flames.

“I couldn’t feel any mana in the air... Is that Spirit Magic?” the elf asked.

The ease with which he’d destroyed the thread put Spider on alert, and he prepared to fight.

“I know your face,” Spider said. “You’re Lotton Flywok the Clairvoyant, of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council.”

“Calm down, Spider. It’s me, Phasmid.”

After Phasmid showed him the dagger he’d received from the young master of their organization, Spider finally believed him and lowered his guard.

“You always doubt me so much,” Phasmid said with a sigh.

“I can’t help it, can I? You have a different face every time I see you. Speaking of that, what did you do with your previous face?”

“It expired,” Phasmid replied. “It was such a shame because I

liked it a lot. I could even use the unique spell Hiding with it. To be honest, I'm already tired of this one, so I'm on the lookout for a new face."

"Is that so?" Spider kicked one of his captives who was still bound with his threads, and the man rolled helplessly in front of Phasmid. "How about that one? He's the informant of the organization the young master had me deal with. He can use the unique spell Transcendent Sight."

"Oh, that is quite rare. In that case..."

Phasmid waved his arm and a blade of wind beheaded the restrained man. Then, he gouged out the corpse's heart with a knife.

"Divine Artifact: No Face."

Phasmid's mana flowed outward from his body before condensing itself into the form of an altar with a bronze mirror at its center. Two boxes lay in front of the mirror. Phasmid picked up one of them and put the heart of the man inside.

Phasmid's Divine Artifact, No Face, allowed him to steal the appearances of the people he killed by enshrining their hearts. By doing so, not only could he copy their appearances, but also their memories and mana.

Phasmid's face warped and twisted until it transformed into that of the man he'd just killed. He moved his body around a little as if testing it.

"I'm a little weaker than I was as Lotton, but oh well."

"That ability of yours really is convenient," Spider said. "The perfect disguise."

"It's not actually *that* convenient," Phasmid replied. "I can only stock up to two faces at once, and while I can copy unique spells, I can't copy Divine Artifacts. Not to mention that I can't entirely stop the hearts from decaying, so I can only pose as someone for so long." As he spoke, Phasmid turned back into Lotton. "The worst part is that I can never return to my real self," he continued. "I

cannot recall what I looked like or how I spoke originally."

"Wouldn't you just turn back into your real self if you removed both hearts from the boxes at once?" Spider asked.

"I'm not sure. I've never tried. Breaking the conditions of a Divine Artifact is quite risky. If I just lost my mana and returned to my real self as a result it wouldn't be so bad, but there's no telling what else could happen. What if I turned into a cursed monster?" Phasmid shrugged. "At any rate, I came to see you because the young master has new orders for you."

Phasmid took out a piece of paper and handed it to Spider.

"If you're delivering his orders in person, it must be an important mission," Spider said, unfolding the paper.

He started reading the orders very carefully. Phasmid observed his face, waiting for his reaction while discreetly preparing for combat. He'd been told to kill Spider on the spot depending on his reaction.

"I understand," Spider eventually said. "Let the young master know I'll do it."

"All right... I shall pray for your good fortune," Phasmid replied. He put down a small box on a half-rotten desk and started walking away.

Spider watched him disappear before holding the piece of paper over a candle until it burned to ashes.

"If these are the young master's orders, I will not question them. I'll see things through, even if it means risking my life," he said to no one in particular.

Spider picked up the little box Phasmid had left and opened it without hesitation, retrieving its contents. It was a clear jewel as large as his palm, inside of which a dark mist swirled. Some may have mistaken it for an ordinary crystal, but Spider could tell it was packed with dense, concentrated mana. He tucked it inside his inner pocket.

◆

In the early hours of the morning, a carriage protected by a large number of knights was about to depart from the imperial palace. Prince Okyst Yutear was there in person to see his guests off as his father's representative.

"Well then, Lord Eiwass, I hope we'll meet again in the future," Okyst said.

"Likewise, Your Highness. Our sojourn here was most productive."

"You're also welcome to visit the empire again at any time, Lady Roselia," Okyst continued. "I enjoyed conversing with a bright and competent lady such as you."

"You're too kind, Your Highness. I don't deserve such praise," Roselia replied, bowing.

After bidding farewell to the prince , Eiwass and Roselia boarded their carriage and the Haldorian procession departed. They'd left so early in the morning because today was the last day of the festival, and the roads undoubtedly would be packed if they waited any longer.

"Couldn't we have waited until the end of the festival instead of going out of our way to leave so early?" Roselia asked.

"You managed to convince Elizabeth. We should head back and inform Her Highness as quickly as possible, don't you think? Compared to a matter so crucial, mingling with the people of the empire bears little importance."

"That is a dangerous statement, my lord. People might think you look down on the empire."

"No one will mind. There are only Haldorians around at the moment. Besides, between the current empire and Elizabeth, it's plain to see which could be a greater threat to Her Highness," Eiwass replied, a strained smile on his face.

When he acted like that, Roselia found herself almost believing that he genuinely had Adel's best interests at heart.

"It's true that my negotiations with Elizabeth have made the chances of her opposing Her Highness far less likely, but if you earn us the ire of the empire in the same breath, it'll defeat the purpose."

"You worry too much, Lady Roselia. Didn't the prince see us off with a smile?"

"He did, but..."

"You don't need to worry about a thing," Eiwass insisted. "I even bought heaps of presents for Her Highness and the others. They must be tired from burying themselves in mountains of paperwork all day."

“Presents?” Now that she thought about it, Roselia remembered their servants loading many boxes she’d never seen onto the carriage. “So those boxes were all presents?” she asked. “When did you even find the time to purchase them?”

“I shopped while you were busy impressing crowds with your fighting skills.”

A vein popped out on Roselia’s forehead, but she forced herself to remain calm. This was Eiwass teasing her, and she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of getting her mad.

“What did you buy?” she asked.

“Popular sweets.”

“Sweets?”

“They’re called ‘chocolate.’ I bought them from Elizabeth’s shop.”

“You sure are brazen, so confidently buying from your sister’s business when she loathes you.”

Eiwass laughed. “I had to queue for a long time. They’re very popular, you see.”

Roselia sighed and refused to dignify him with an answer. She didn’t want to tell Eiwass, but she, too, had heard of the famous chocolate Elizabeth sold, and she’d sent her waiting maid to buy her some while they were in the capital.

◇

“Mama! Faster!” Alice exclaimed, pulling my arm.

“Wait, Alice. There’s no need for us to rush.”

Today was the fifth day of the festival. To celebrate the end of the festivities, there would be even more stalls, as well as performances taking place in the main square.

“Alice sure loves to watch street performers,” Egret said. He laughed and picked up the little girl, letting her ride on his shoulders. Carol, who’d been walking on the ground, hurriedly climbed up his body so she could settle on Alice’s head.

Egret and Oulu had accompanied us for the last day, so we formed a large group. We were walking alongside the avenue, which was currently closed off to most carriages, and heading toward the main square.

Suddenly, I heard someone scream in the distance in front of us. My view was blocked by the crowd, so I couldn't tell what was going on. After a few seconds, more screams echoed and people started running en masse. Panic erupted through the crowd as the smell of blood wafted through the air.

"Wh-What happened?" Alice asked, worried.

"Egret!" I yelled.

"I know!" he replied. "Alice, hold on to Carol, all right?"

"O-Okay!"

"Kyuu?!"

"Lunoa, hold on to me! Misha, make sure to keep up!"

"Y-Yes!" Lunoa yelped.

"I will!" Misha said.

Egret held Alice, making sure she wouldn't fall from his shoulders, and jumped. He kicked off the wall beside him and landed on a nearby roof. I did the same thing, lifting Lunoa and carrying her under my arm while Misha, Mireille, Barl, and Oulu followed.

"What happened?" Mireille asked.

"It came from over there," I said. I looked over at the area that was the source of the screams. It was far away, but even at that distance I could make out a sea of blood.

"A terrorist attack?" Egret surmised. He put Alice down.

In the middle of the ever-growing puddle of blood was a man

clad in black. He was mercilessly slaughtering every last person he could reach. There were no signs of why he was doing this. Unlike during the opening parade, there were no important nobles or royalty here.

"Do you think it's a political terrorist attack?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Egret replied. "The killer seems to be attacking people at random."

What would be the goal of such an attack here in the capital? I wondered. I pulled Alice toward me so she wouldn't see the carnage.

The two knights guarding the square finally made it to the scene.

"Looks like they'll take care of things at last," Egret said.

"You're right. There's no way that man could fend off two—" I swallowed the rest of my sentence down.

With a single swing of his weapon, the man had just severed the arms and legs of one of the knights even though he was still far away. The second knight lost focus for an instant, turning to look at his dismembered comrade. In the blink of an eye, the man's dagger pierced his throat.

"That man is no regular hoodlum!"

Egret was right. Even if the killer had some sort of trick to attack at such a distance, the knight had only been distracted for a moment. For an average adversary, that window would never have been long enough to land a critical blow. The black-clad man was powerful.

However, this was still the middle of the imperial capital. Reinforcements would rush here as soon as they realized that two knights had been killed. In fact, I could already see knights riding on horseback from the imperial palace.

"It seems like even the Imperial Guard is making an appearance," I said, noticing their unique armor.

The Imperial Guard was an elite force assigned to protect the imperial family. Only members of the imperial family had the right to issue them orders, so if they were coming, it meant that the emperor was already aware of the situation.

The Imperial Guard wasn't coming alone. Ten knights—not on horseback—were already closing in on the terrorist after using body reinforcement techniques to enhance their speed. The first to reach the man swung his blade at him with expert technique. The terrorist twisted his body to dodge, but he wasn't quick enough and the knight managed to wound his right leg. He fell down in the pool of blood that covered the ground. The knight brought his arm down once again to finish him off, but the man tried to unleash another of his peculiar long-range attacks. Thankfully, some of the imperial guards noticed and they rode faster, arriving just in time to block it.

"It's finally over," Egret said.

"Indeed," I replied. "Let's leave."

I still didn't understand what that man's goal had been, but the attack was finished. I was convinced there was nothing more he could do when all of a sudden I sensed a colossal surge of mana. I turned around in a hurry to look at the man in black and saw that he was holding something. The object was the source of all this mana.

"A magic item?!" one of us exclaimed, but I was too taken aback to tell who.

A magic item that contained such an overwhelming quantity of mana was bad news. There was no telling what could happen. I immediately materialized my Grimoire of Beelzebub and tried to put up a barrier, but the mana of the man's magic item condensed before I could do so. Then, the mana began seeping out of the jewel and spreading outward.

"What in the world...?" Egret looked equal parts astonished and confused.

Now that I'd seen the jewel, I knew what this item was. I'd read

about it in the records from the forbidden collection in the Haldorian palace. Even in the days of the Old Kingdom, using these items had been a grave taboo, and not even the oldest documents recorded their method of fabrication.

"A jewel of death..." I whispered.

The mana coming out of the jewel touched the first knights in its path and their bodies convulsed. They started rotting before our very eyes, and before long, only bones remained. The resulting skeletons bore a strong resemblance to lower-level undead monsters, but the mana they exuded was far beyond that of such creatures.

The imperial guards who had yet to come into contact with the mana retreated immediately, but the skeletons picked their swords right back up and rushed at them. They were ridiculously fast and closed the distance in a heartbeat.

"AAARGH!" an imperial guard shrieked as a skeleton's blade pierced his body through a gap in his armor.

It passed through him entirely, emerging out his back. The imperial guard fell to his knees and stopped moving entirely for a moment before rising back up with an eerie groan.

"It moved!"

"It's a zombie," I said.

"If these skeletons can turn the people they kill into zombies, things are looking bad," Barl said.

I let the grimoire I'd just materialized disappear and summoned my Grimoire of Mammon instead. Then, I swiftly took out Flügel, which had just finished regenerating itself a few days ago.

"Mireille! Take the girls and leave! Now!" I ordered.

"Oulu, you run too," Egret said, retrieving his own weapon from his magic bag.

We couldn't let this man run wild. If he wasn't stopped, the imperial capital would soon vanish into an ocean of blood. The man was still going around the area, using his jewel of death to produce more and more undead.

I jumped down and started running toward him. When he noticed me, he lifted his arm and the undead blocked my path.

"So he can even control the undead," I noted.

"You're in our way!" Barl shouted. He dashed past me and started delivering reinforced kick after kick to the undead, destroying them one after another.

There was no end to the zombies, though, and more approached to replace the ones Barl had struck down. While we were stuck here, the black-clad man just continued to make more undead. On top of turning the dead bodies of the civilians and knights into monsters, he also summoned more undead using mana as a catalyst.

"Ellie, Barl, move back!"

I reflexively jumped back at Egret's order.

"Sand Wave!" A tsunami of sand erupted from Egret's shamshir, swallowing and crushing the enemies. Even undead monsters wouldn't be able to regenerate themselves after being so thoroughly pulverized.

I rushed into the breach Egret had opened. Clasping Flügel tightly, I swung my blade at the man's neck. My timing was perfect, but the man let his legs buckle on purpose, falling down and dodging at the last moment. He'd managed to evade my blow, sure, but the way he'd done so left him completely vulnerable to my next attack. He wouldn't be able to escape this time.

"Careful!" Barl screamed, grabbing my collar and dragging me backward just as I was about to bring my blade down.

Barl had clearly sensed something dangerous from the way the man's arm had twitched. Suddenly, I noticed something glinting in the light in front of me.

“A thread?!” I exclaimed.

The man had sent a thread imbued with mana at me. It had grazed my bangs, and a few strands of my hair fluttered in the wind. Barl’s arm, however, was impacted more severely.

This man truly wasn’t an ordinary hooligan. Was he an agent provocateur sent by some foreign organization?

“You saved me,” I told Barl. As I thanked him, I took a potion out of my Grimoire of Mammon and threw it at him. Then, I raised Flügel in front of me and started concentrating my mana.

“Ice Needle,” I chanted. Before the sharp shards of ice could reach the man, a zombie jumped into their trajectory, becoming a meat shield for him. The man directed even more zombies at us while he wove his threads to form a spiderweb around me. The scope of his attack was so large that I struggled to get out of the way.

“Ellie!”

“Missy!”

Barl had paused his movements for a moment to heal his arm, and Egret had been focused on shaking off the skeletons and zombies. They were both running toward me, but they wouldn’t make it in time. I focused my mana into my arms and prepared myself to guard, but right before the man’s threads could reach me, mud surged from the ground, sending me flying backward. I twisted my body in midair to land on my feet and saw a gigantic fist made of mud right where I’d been standing. It swung at the man in black, only to be torn into pieces by his threads.

I looked around and spotted a woman with reddish brown hair. It was Mud Sistia, the Rank A adventurer I’d seen fight in the tournament just yesterday. She wasn’t alone; several high-ranked adventurers and mercenaries who’d also participated in the tournament were there, as well as others who were confident in their strength. The members of the Imperial Guard had also composed themselves and surrounded the square to make sure the

undead wouldn't get out.

"Miss Ellie, are you okay?!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Tida, Elsa!"

These two must have also been near the square and come to assist us.

"That man's the culprit, huh?" Elsa said.

"He is," I confirmed. "I thought he was just a hoodlum at first, but he's unexpectedly powerful."

When I looked over at our allies fighting with the undead, I noticed that there were now higher-level monsters such as dullahans and wraiths among them.

"Wow! It's not just zombies and skeletons, is it?" Tida exclaimed, noticing the same thing.

"They must have emerged spontaneously because of all that undead miasma," Elsa said. "It might be because of that strange jewel he holds, but the miasma is unbelievably thick."

After talking the situation over, Tida, Elsa, Egret, and I surrounded the man. A group of undead tried to attack us from behind, but the imperial knights and the Mud Dolls Sistia had created protected us.

We were about to close in on the man when a scream echoed from the other side of the square. A humongous skeleton had appeared. It had grabbed a knight and was currently slamming his body against the ground.

"A giant skeleton!"

"Tida!"

"I'm on it! Divine Artifact: Harvest!"

Tida was about to rush to the giant skeleton when it was smashed into pieces. Yuu appeared over the debris, holding her Divine Artifact.

“If this keeps up, the imperial capital will turn into a den of undead!” she exclaimed, running over as soon as she saw us.

“Thankfully, it looks like there are quite a few powerful fighters around. We’re going to have to push through and defeat him,” Elsa said.

“There’s no time to waste. Let’s subdue him,” I said.

The man chuckled before speaking in an accent typical of the Southern Continent. “The Silver Witch, the Dark, the Phoenix, and even the Envoy? And these two men accompanying you seem fairly skilled too.”

“You look far too carefree considering your current predicament,” I told him.

“Well, I did expect things would develop this way,” he simply replied.

I glared at him while whispering instructions to Barl. “The undead are spreading faster than I expected. Go join Mireille and the others.”

“Got it,” he said.

The man looked back at me as though he thought I was no threat to him. He smirked as he played with the jewel in his hand.

“Will I have to wait much longer?” he asked.

“No. We’re coming,” I replied.

We all readied our weapons.

◆

“How is the situation?!”

“At the moment, the adventurers and mercenaries who happened to be present are fighting the culprit. The knights and the city guards are focusing on evacuating the city.”

“Have three platoons of imperial guards head there immediately.” Okyst strode swiftly through the palace’s corridors as he gave out orders. “We’ll send the army too,” he continued. “Call on the men at once.”

“B-But, Your Highness! The opponents are undead monsters! The army’s equipment isn’t—”

“Most of the enemies are lower-rank monsters. Plunging their swords in holy water beforehand will be more than enough. Ask for the cooperation of every church of Ibris in the capital and secure as much holy water as possible.”

“Un-Understood!”

Having given his orders, Okyst changed into his armor. It was a masterpiece passed down through the imperial family, and the armor itself was imbued with holy mana.

“Your Highness! I’ve summoned the army and ordered them to get ready to move as quickly as possible.”

“Perfect. I’ll join the soldiers,” Okyst replied.

Several hundred soldiers had already gathered in the training grounds of the imperial palace. Okyst stood in front of them on an elevated platform.

“Soldiers,” he started, his eyes scanning through the crowd, “a crisis is upon us.” Okyst waited, letting the weight of his words sink in. “We cannot let the people of this empire down. Today, we must fight against the wicked to protect them!” he exclaimed.

The air grew tense as clergymen ran through the ranks carrying buckets of holy water.

“Do not fear, soldiers!” Okyst continued. “As you can see, we

have the support of the Church of Ibris. With the blessing of holy water, you shall easily slay the undead with your swords!" The imperial prince unsheathed his own sword and raised it. "And I will be right by your side, leading the charge!"

◇

I felt like I saw the man's body sway ever so slightly, and immediately after, he vanished into thin air.

A chill ran through my back and I shivered. He'd closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. The man lifted his arm and I saw a piece of thread glimmer. I had no time to dodge as he brought down his arm. Thankfully, Egret's shamshir deflected the thread before it could cut open my abdomen.

"Impressive," the man said.

"You... You're Spider, aren't you?" Egret said, parrying more pieces of thread.

"Spider?" I repeated.

"I don't know much about him either, but I've heard that among the members of a mysterious organization operating on the Central Continent, there is an assassin with a Southern Continent accent who uses threads as a weapon. According to my source, that organization may be involved in the political unrest of the Nile Kingdom," Egret explained.

"Are you sure that info's legit?" Tida asked.

"I heard it from a merchant who frequents the royal palace often," he replied, "though I couldn't say how credible it actually is."

"This all sounds pretty fishy," Elsa chimed in.

A mysterious organization operating from the shadows? I knew of quite a few of these from my days in the kingdom. I'd even had to confront some of them, including the People of the New Haldoria, which had approached Friede in an attempt to use him

politically, the Dawn of Sorcery, which abducted children who had large mana pools, and the Patriotic Liberation Union, which had been trying to instigate insurrections in Haldoria's vassal countries. I'd destroyed all three of them, so it couldn't be one of those, though. This Spider character had to belong to another organization.

The man in black looked at us with a composed expression and smiled.

"You would be correct," he told Egret. "Our organization acts upon receiving requests."

"Does that mean the organization itself has no clear objective or purpose?" Yuu whispered pensively.

Elsa nodded. "There are crime syndicates like that."

The man had completely recovered his balance, and we had surrounded him in a semicircle. He looked at each of us one by one, then lifted his arms and spoke.

"I believe that's enough chatter." He waved his arms like an orchestra conductor. In response, a morbid symphony of skeletons and zombies rushed at us in unison.

"What's going on?!" Sistia exclaimed, using her army of Mud Dolls to destroy as many skeletons as she could. "There are clearly way more of them than dead citizens and guards!"

"He's using his mana as a catalyst to summon more," I replied. "Tida!"

"Yes, yes, I know!"

We left Yuu, Elsa, and Egret in charge of the front line and moved back somewhat. I summoned my Grimoire of Beelzebub and stood back to back with Tida while I swiftly flipped through the pages.

"Purification!" we both cast simultaneously.

Our holy spells combined and crashed onto the undead like a wave of light. The skeletons and zombies vanished, but since we'd both limited the power of the spell to increase its range, the higher-level monsters weren't affected. Thankfully, Yuu, Elsa, and Egret took care of them.

“The Envoy and the Silver Witch teaming up to produce a purification spell? I expected nothing less of you. But I wonder, how will you respond to this?”

Spider’s fingers twitched slightly, and the remaining monsters that had overrun the square disappeared, turning into miasma. The vapor gathered into several lumps and gave birth to new undead monsters.

“Elder liches?!”

Skeletons wearing mages’ robes had just appeared. They exuded much more pressure and mana than the regular skeletons we’d been fighting so far.

“As well as a giant skeleton, a skeleton dragon, and more...” said Yuu.

I let my Grimoire of Beelzebub disappear and condensed my mana in my hand once more.

“Divine Artifact: Grimoire of Belphegor,” I chanted. I took silver coins out of my pockets and threw them in the air, using them as catalysts to summon saint birds. “Fly around the area,” I ordered.

The birds chirped and took off.

I poured more mana into my grimoire and chanted “Synchrosense.” That spell allowed me to share the senses of the monsters I had contracts with, and what the birds saw appeared in my head. “High-level undead monsters have emerged on a large scale,” I said.

Synchrosense did not have any particular attribute, but I couldn’t use it unless I was holding my Grimoire of Belphegor. While the most powerful enemy here was most likely the man in front of us, the biggest threat to the city was the undead. Keeping track of them was well worth giving up on my other grimoires for the time being.

“Yuu, Elsa, Tida, go!” I yelled.

Many adventurers and knights were already grappling with the

elder liches, but they had to be stopped—and fast. Otherwise, they would keep on summoning other powerful undead monsters for as long as they had mana.

"Yuu and Elsa, focus on the most powerful monsters! Tida, please imbue the weapons of the strongest fighters with holy mana!"

There was no time to discuss strategy, so I just gave out directions. Tida immediately imbued holy mana into Yuu and Elsa's Divine Artifacts, and the three of them dashed away.

Tida ran toward the adventurers who were fighting the elder liches, Yuu headed straight toward the giant skeleton made of ominous black bones, and Elsa joined a group of knights who were struggling to face a large number of undead.

"Are you sure splitting your forces was wise?" Spider asked.

"Don't act tough," Egret said. "You need a ton of mana to maintain your threads, and pulling from that magic item also requires you to use your own mana first, right?"

"After summoning so many powerful undead monsters, you must have become weaker," I added.

Our words didn't seem to fluster Spider in the slightest. Attacking him directly wouldn't be easy because of his threads. If we dove in headfirst without thinking, we'd be turned into mincemeat.

Despite the thunderous fighting noises around us, Egret, Spider, and I were stuck in an eerily silent standstill.

◆

As Mireille and the others ran away with Alice, more and more undead appeared. When zombies blocked their path, Misha gasped before leaping forward.

"Consecutive Slashes!"

She pivoted on her right leg and struck several monsters one after another. However, that one skill wasn't enough to bring them down, and she only succeeded in pushing them back slightly. She was about to dash toward them to finish the job when Mireille stopped her.

"Misha, there is no need to chase after them."

"R-Right!"

Misha hurriedly ran back to Mireille and the others, and they continued to flee. Lunoa used her wind magic to blow away a few ghosts that were closing in on them from the front, while Oulu destroyed skeletons with her kukri.

As the group attempted to get away from the square, a large number of skeletons unexpectedly jumped out of the stone pavement, separating them.

"Alice! Don't move from where you are!" Mireille exclaimed while firing arrows of light at the skeletons.

Less than two meters separated Mireille from Alice, but a large being that had appeared between them pounced at the little girl.

"Alice!"

"Oh no! A ghoul!" Oulu said, rushing toward her.

However, the ghoul had already started bringing down its rotten arms, aiming right at Alice. Her eyes grew wide in shock, but before the ghoul could touch her, a cloud of dust rose. Someone picked Alice up, getting her out of the way while simultaneously destroying the ghoul in a fireball.

"Are you all right?"

"Mr. Flywok!"

The elven man who'd appeared was Lotton Flywok, a member of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council. Lotton noticed Alice's knee had been grazed when he'd pulled her to safety, and he took out a

handkerchief to wipe off the blood before healing her with light spirit magic.

“This place is dangerous, let us—”

More skeletons appeared before he could finish his sentence. However, Barl suddenly joined the group and destroyed the monsters in a heartbeat with a kick.

“Are you all okay?!” he asked as soon as he landed.

“Yes,” Mireille replied. “Barl, please take care of Alice.”

“Got it.” Barl picked up the little girl while Lotton stepped forward to face the undead horde that continued pouring in.

“Leave this place to me,” he said. “You must get the children to safety.”

“Thank you very much,” said Mireille.

“Sorry about that, “Barl added.

The group entrusted the rest of the monsters there to Lotton and began to run once more.

As soon as Mireille and the others were far enough away, Lotton waved his hands and all of the undead around him turned to ashes.

“That went better than I expected,” he whispered, looking at the handkerchief stained with Alice’s blood. He put it inside a small vial and tucked it into his pocket. “I was surprised when the young master told me about it, but that girl truly is...” Lotton trailed off.

He hadn’t meant for anyone to hear him, but he suddenly noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

“Who?! Ah, it’s just a carbuncle. If I recall correctly, I saw it around Alice before.” Lotton used spirit magic to summon a flame, but after thinking it over, he extinguished it. “I shouldn’t. Now is not the time to have them suspect me of anything. Go on, little

beast, go find your master," Lotton said, shooing Carol away with his hand.

"Kyuu," Carol cried, looking at Lotton before running toward Alice and the others.

◆

Tida first rushed toward a party of adventurers who were fighting elder liches. The group was composed of two warriors, an archer, and a healer. Thanks to their flawless coordination and the support of their healer, they were holding off two elder liches at the same time. Doing that took talent.

Tida cut down a wraith that was sneaking up on them from behind with her own Divine Artifact before using Holy Enchantment on the adventurers' weapons. Then, she cut off one of the arms of the first elder lich with her scythe to give the group an advantage before dashing toward the next adventurer party.

She repeated the same process several times, enchanting the weapons of many powerful fighters. Then, she spotted an imperial guard crossing swords with a skeleton knight.

"Looks like you need a hand!" she said. Tida swung her scythe and cut off the skeleton knight's legs.

Tida's Divine Artifact, Harvest, could absorb the mana of the enemies it cut through. This effect was especially powerful against undead, which depended greatly on their mana to maintain their forms as opposed to monsters that had flesh bodies.

"I'm indebted to you," the imperial guard replied as he finished off the skeleton knight.

Tida used some healing magic on him. "How is the government going to respond?" she asked.

"It was chaos at first, but His Highness Prince Okyst took control of the situation. He sent us ahead of time even though we normally remain by the imperial family's side to protect them, and he's currently gathering the army. We only need to hold out for a little

longer before reinforcements arrive."

"He'll deploy the army?"

"Yes," the imperial guard replied. "However, he'll need time. The knights' swords are made with a mithril alloy, but the regular soldiers have lower-quality weapons that will barely work on the undead. They will plunge them into holy water to imbue them with holiness temporarily."

"I see. Then we have to decrease the number of enemies to buy time for the citizens to flee until the soldiers get here."

"Exactly. I will go help the citizens who have fallen behind. Sister, thank you very much for your assistance."

"Don't worry about it! May God's blessing be with you!" Tida exclaimed, waving goodbye to the imperial guard. As a dullahan emerged from the shadow of a building, she promptly sliced it in half. "If the army's coming, we can leave the small fry to them. I should focus on thinning out the big ones." Tida sighed. "I just wanted to have a fun time at the festival, but here I am... I don't get it. I'm always so pious and good, so why me?"

Tida tilted her head in confusion while slaughtering a host of powerful monsters. Then, a conspicuously loud noise caught her attention, so she ran toward the source of the sound.

Yuu dashed straight toward the black giant skeleton, which had rested its hand on the symbol of the Central Square, the clock tower. A regular giant skeleton was roughly as tall as three to four men, but this one was as tall as ten adult men. It was plain to see that it was a mutated version. The square was already in ruins, and Yuu leaped off of the rubble with a powerful kick. She swung Period with all her strength, aiming at the gargantuan enemy. The giant skeleton fell to the ground due to the force of the impact, but not even Yuu's gigantic battle-axe had managed to crack its thick bones that shone with a black luster. She'd barely left a scratch.

"So hard!"

The skeleton swung its arm at her, but Yuu blocked it with the handle of her axe. She held her ground for a moment, but the gap in their sizes and masses was too much. The force of the blow sent her flying and her body slammed into the clock tower. Yuu quickly regained her balance, though. The clock tower was starting to crumble, but she deftly ran up the side of it and jumped.

At the same time, the giant skeleton extended its hand toward her.

"Ngh!" Yuu used her gigantic battle-axe, which was as tall as she was, to deflect the monster's hand and landed on it. She ran up its bones that were as thick as logs, concentrating mana into her blade, and brought it down when she reached the skeleton's shoulder blade.

Yuu's Divine Artifact, Period, had no special effects. It was simply sturdy, heavy, and sharp. Yuu leveraged her entire body to swing it downward, charging it up with as much mana as she could. The condensed mana made her weapon glow as she slammed it against the monster's body. The axe smashed through its shoulder blade and crushed its ribs. The rest of the black bones soon crumbled down.

"As I thought, taking care of a single foe is far easier than dealing with countless small fry," she said, resting her battle-axe on her shoulder. She rushed toward a group of knights who were struggling against a skeleton dragon.

Yuu planted the handle of her battle-axe into the ground to block an incoming hit from the skeleton dragon, then used it to vault onto its spine. Even if skeleton monsters were all bones, they still had a weak point—their mana core. Locating and destroying it was the most efficient way to get rid of undead monsters, but Yuu picked another, simpler method.

Divine Artifacts were made of condensed mana to begin with, but Yuu continued pouring tremendous quantities of mana into Period.

She let out a battle cry and exclaimed, "Final Slash!"

Light flashed. A blade of destructive mana descended upon the skeleton dragon, annihilating its entire body, including its core, in a single strike.

“All right! On to the next one!”

Elsa joined a group of knights who were grappling with a large number of undead monsters. She immediately slew a few skeletons and zombies.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Thank you! You saved us!”

Elsa took a step forward, and the skeletons and zombies extended their hands toward her. As she faced the colossal swarm of undead, Elsa increased the mana contained in her sword, and flames flickered on the surface of the blade.

The worse her situation was, the sharper Elsa’s Divine Artifact—Spada della Fenice—became and the more her physical abilities were enhanced. She unleashed several flashes of her sword and countless undead monsters fell to the ground in pieces.

Elsa humphed. “I guess that’s the extent of the power I can get when surrounded by insignificant weaklings.”

With Elsa joining the fray, the knights seemed to regain their footing. They grew calmer, and their commander started issuing orders.

“Second platoon, bring the wounded to the rear! Third platoon and fourth platoon, help the citizens escape! First platoon, protect their backs!”

The knights thanked Elsa before dutifully following the commands.

Just as Elsa had finished dealing with this swarm of monsters, someone called out her name.

“Elsa!”

The members of her party had arrived.

“I’m glad to see you’re all in one piece,” she said.

“Who do you take us for?!” one of the members replied.

“There’s no time to waste. Let’s focus on the strong foes first. Marty, you scout the area. Lisa, you can purify monsters, but give priority to healing. Sarina, you protect her. Sicily, you’re with me on the front line.”

“Got it!”

Having received Elsa’s instructions, the members of Sharp Edge quickly got into formation and dashed toward an elder lich who was leading a pack of wraiths.

◇

A group of undead stood in front of Spider to shield him from our attacks. I used my magic to freeze and shatter them, then I started running forward, carefully using Flügel to clear the web that Spider had woven across the battlefield. Countless zombies and skeletons tried to swarm us, but Egret took care of them with his Divine Artifact, Starving Sahra. The sand it emitted took the shape of thorny vines which pierced through the monsters, destroying them.

Spider lifted one hand and a dullahan rode toward me, raising its spear. I readied Flügel to counterattack, but before the monster could reach me, a dragon made of mud devoured the dullahan. Sistia stood atop the head of the dragon, controlling her many Mud Dolls.

“You saved my life earlier. Thank you,” I said, remembering how her mud had pushed me away from certain evisceration by Spider’s threads.

Sistia shrugged. “I wouldn’t want to lose a competent ally in the middle of an important fight,” she replied. “Though if you really want to thank me, you know how.” She rubbed her fingers together in the universal sign for money.

I laughed. “You got it. For now, though, we’re short on time, so may I request some more help?”

“Sure thing.”

Having finished my short conversation with Sistia, I once again dashed toward Spider as Egret covered me from behind. Spider evaded my blade and sent a thread flying at me in return, but one of Sistia’s Mud Dolls squeezed itself between the thread and me, stopping it. Seizing an opening, Egret aimed for Spider’s head with his shamshir, but Spider amputated part of his own body with his threads, which allowed him to evade the blow.

“Mud Swamp.”

While Spider was still regenerating his wound, Sistia turned the

paving stones into mud, making him sink into the ground.

Now that Spider's movement had been restricted, I slashed at him with Flügel. He produced a thick layer of threads to protect himself, but Flügel's extraordinarily sharp blade cut right through them and into the bones of his shoulder. Despite all of this, Spider didn't seem to feel any pain, and he immediately counterattacked.

He must have taken some sort of drug, I concluded.

"This is bad," I said. "The undead are about to escape the square." Through the vision of the saint birds, I could see that the people surrounding the perimeter of the square were having a tough time keeping the monsters contained. Some even appeared to be losing the will to fight. "Morale won't hold much longer," I added.

No matter how many times the soldiers and adventurers defeated the undead, the foes inexorably restored themselves. Our allies' physical endurance was being tested to the limit, as was their mental strength. Those whose weapons had been enchanted by Tida could finish undead monsters off for good, but in the face of this overwhelming army, it hardly made a difference. It was only a matter of time before our front line would collapse entirely.

Just as all seemed lost, a voice echoed across the square. "Don't falter!" The person who'd just yelled out encouragement was a young man in dashing armor.

"That's... His Highness Prince Okyst?"

The young man was indeed Okyst Yutear, the crown prince of the empire.

"Soldiers, knights, don't falter! Behind you are the people you've sworn to protect!" His voice rang out with clarity and power. "And you, courageous adventurers and mercenaries—men and women with noble, heroic hearts who have unsheathed your blades to protect the capital! I, the crown prince of the Yutear Empire, have witnessed your bravery! When we subjugate the undead together, I promise you will be rewarded as you deserve! Heroes, the time has

come to carve your names into the history of this glorious empire!”

Thunderous cheers erupted in response to Okyst’s address, and the combined voices of the crowd were so powerful that we could feel the ground rumble. The knights and soldiers who had previously let go of their swords in despair picked them up, while all of the adventurers and mercenaries, having been promised riches and glory, became emboldened.

“It looks like our morale will hold after all,” I said.

“Right. I wasn’t sure where to claim my reward when this was all over, but now I know the imperial family will pay up. I’m relieved,” Sistia joked.

“Say, Ellie, do you think merchants can claim that reward too?” Egret asked jovially, tapping one shamshir against his shoulder.

“I’m sure they’ll give it to you if you do a good job,” I replied.

Even as we bantered, we continued exchanging blows with Spider. It seemed as though cutting Spider’s threads had no effect whatsoever. He always immediately created more to replace them.

“Thread Manipulation: Slash.”

Did he just use a skill?

Spider’s threads suddenly became much quicker and stronger. Egret crossed his shamshirs in front of him to block the attack, but the impact was so violent that he was still sent flying.

“Egret!” I exclaimed.

“Do you really think you can afford to look away? Thread Manipulation: Binding.”

Spider’s threads spread out before closing in on me, seemingly seeking to entrap me. I sliced through some of them with Flügel and swiftly jumped through the breach I’d created, but Spider’s threads wrapped around my left ankle before I could get out entirely. I tried to cut them away but couldn’t act in time. The threads traveled up

my leg and across my body, binding all four of my limbs.

“Thread Puppet: Lion,” Spider chanted. A myriad of threads intertwined, forming an elaborate shape—that of a ferocious beast. The thread lion pounced on me, baring its fangs. It was coming straight for my neck.

I groaned as I froze my own body so I could begin to rupture the threads. I wouldn’t have been able to do so if he’d used the same mithril-like threads he’d been fighting with before, but he had created the strings that had entrapped me entirely using mana. Without the use of any special techniques, the result had more or less the same properties as regular threads. Although it took a little longer than I expected, I managed to freeze and shatter my bindings to break away.

I threw my body to the side to dodge the lion, but its fangs still grazed me.

“Damn you!” Egret screamed, lunging at the puppet with his shamshirs. He, too, was scratched in his battle against the beast, but none of the cuts looked severe. I’d been wounded more badly.

“Aqua Heal,” I chanted. A sphere of water appeared and covered my wounded arm. The injury started mending slowly. Aqua Heal was a great spell that also disinfected, detoxified, and removed curses on top of healing.

Egret noticed that I was unable to move much because I was healing myself, and he placed himself protectively between me and the enemy. He changed his fighting style to one that was more defensive.

“Sand Bullet!”

“Thread Puppet: Armor.” Strings twirled in the air before wrapping around Spider’s body like a suit of armor.

“Huh?!” Egret gasped as Spider charged forward, completely ignoring the bullets he’d fired.

“Get back, Egret!” I called out. I stepped in front of him and

chanted, “Ice Block!”

Several large pieces of ice appeared before us, forcing Spider to modify his trajectory. I guessed which way he’d move and immediately brought Flügel down, slicing him in half.

“What?!” I exclaimed in confusion. It didn’t feel as though I’d cut through flesh at all! “Egret!” I yelled, hoping to warn him, but it was already too late.

The real Spider had smashed through the ice blocks, and his threads had just pierced Egret’s chest. Egret had been quick to react and had used both his normal shamshir and his Divine Artifact to block, so he’d managed to deflect the blow somewhat and avoid a deadly wound. Still, he was badly hurt.

Spider had taken advantage of my ice as a distraction to shed his armor and use it as bait. He must have known he’d suffer some damage by throwing himself through the ice, but he’d done it anyway. I’d completely misread the situation.

“Argh!” Egret let out. Despite the pain, he stepped forward and grabbed Spider’s arm. “Sand Bonds.”

Sand started covering Spider’s body, holding him in place. I created a sharp blade of ice and hurled it at Spider. The ice pierced through his body, but Egret’s binding of sand also lost its effect.

“Mud Legion!” Sistia chanted. Without a moment’s delay, a multitude of Mud Dolls rushed at Spider, which drew his attention. I took advantage of the distraction to cast a healing spell on Egret.

“Water Ball Heal.” I remained on alert while healing Egret’s chest. It was doubtful that my blade of ice or the Mud Dolls would be enough to kill Spider.

“Sistia, I have a request,” I whispered in the adventurer’s ear. She nodded.

As I expected, Spider emerged, having destroyed Sistia’s dolls and shattered my ice blade with his threads. He still seemed perfectly fine.

“Fighting the three of you at once is a little tough.” Despite Spider’s words, his hateful smirk was still plastered on his lips. “Thread Manipulation: Dispersion.”

Egret’s wound wasn’t entirely cured yet, so I stepped in front of him and created shards of ice, sending them flying at the woven spiral Spider had just released. I managed to block the attack, but my ice was crushed into tiny shavings.

“Mud Swamp,” Sistia tried once more. The ground under Spider’s feet turned into mud. “This time, I won’t let you go,” Sistia declared. “Mud Wave!” Sistia slammed her hands against the ground and a large swell of mud rose, crashing into Spider.

“Thread Manipulation: Sphere.”

Spider created a ball of threads around him. The mud slammed against it, but it didn’t rupture, leaving him unscathed. He quickly turned the tables by launching his strings at Sistia in a slashing motion, but she used some of her Mud Dolls to shield her.

In just a few more minutes, Egret’s recovery would be complete. We had to hold out until then.

“Let’s see how you fare against this,” Spider said. “Thread Puppet: Dragon.”

The magic cords twisted and assembled until they formed a gigantic dragon. I truly hadn’t expected Spider to still have this much mana. He was far stronger than most Rank A adventurers.

The thread dragon raised its humongous arm.

“This is not looking good,” I whispered.

Egret still wasn’t cured, so he couldn’t run just yet. If I moved away, he would die. But considering the size of the dragon and the quantity of mana it exuded, ice alone wouldn’t be enough to block it.

“Ellie, just run! Don’t mind me!” Egret screamed.

He was right behind me, but I felt as though his voice sounded distant. This was the first time I had found myself truly faced with the threat of death. My thoughts flowed at an incredible speed, the colors around me faded, and it seemed as though time itself had slowed down. For some reason, unshakable confidence that I could get us out of this dire situation welled up inside my chest. It was utterly groundless, but I was completely certain that if I tried it now, I'd succeed in casting a certain spell I'd theorized about many times, but had never been able to pull off. It was a spell similar to the one that could temporarily make the most monstrous human I knew into a true monster on the battlefield.

"O silver ice king, devour my body and reclaim your might in this realm: Ice Spiritification!"

The nature of my mana changed as it flew into my body. I could feel myself becoming a different being—something that wasn't human anymore. It was the same as when I'd used my grimoire to copy that devil Bulat's Thunder Spiritification. However, while the nature of my mana somehow felt more familiar to me this time, only one of my arms turned into a perfect spirit form. It might have been a matter of proficiency, or perhaps I simply didn't have enough mana left to transform my entire body. Either way, I could tell I wouldn't be able to maintain this form for more than a few seconds.

"But a few seconds will be plenty," I said. I lifted my right arm—the embodiment of ice itself. As soon as the thread dragon made contact with it, it froze and disintegrated.

“That’s impossible! You spiritified part of your body?! That isn’t... That isn’t human magic!”

“Unfortunately for you, the opponent I’ve set my sights on has long since surpassed the limits of humanity.”

I was now out of mana and my Ice Spiritification came undone. My right arm was frostbitten. It felt hot, as though it were burning. When Spider saw the state I was in, his smirk disappeared. I could tell he wasn't in the mood to toy with his prey anymore. He radiated killing intent.

"You're dangerous. Too dangerous," he said. "I must kill you here, even if it goes against the young master's wishes!"

"The young master?" I repeated, puzzled.

"Thread Puppet: Dragon!"

"Like hell I'll let you do that!" Egret exclaimed, stepping in front of me with one hand still pressed against his wound. "You retreat, Ellie!"

The dragon, however, completely ignored Egret. It went around him to attack me.

"Ellie!" Egret screamed.

"Everything is...fine," I mumbled, despite being on the verge of losing consciousness. "Time's up."

A shadow appeared overhead. A figure had just leaped down from the head of a massive mud serpent that was slithering across the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. Before we knew it, the thread dragon was reduced to useless fibers. The person who'd defeated it was a veteran knight.

Egret's eyes widened in surprise. "Th-That's..."

I held on to my painful arm and lowered my head as well as I could. "Thank you for saving us, Sir Rhodostos."

This man was Mathias Rhodostos, the grand master of the Imperial Knights and the most powerful knight in the empire.

"I apologize for the delay," he replied, glaring at Spider. "Allow me to express my gratitude and respect for the wonderful fight you've put up."

“Are you okay?!” Sistia asked, immediately taking out a high-grade potion and pouring it over my arm.

She’d been the one to lead Mathias here. I’d noticed that he was on his way to the square thanks to Synchrosense, so I’d asked Sistia to find him and relay to him what was happening. After summoning numerous Mud Dolls to distract Spider, she’d left atop her mud snake to get Mathias. I’d known that all I had to do was hold on until Mathias arrived. That second thread dragon had been a serious threat, though. I was incredibly thankful that Sistia and Mathias had made it back in time.

“Sorry for the trouble,” I told Sistia.

“Oh, it’s not a gift. I’ll bill you for that potion later.”

“Ha ha! Of course; I’m happy to pay up.”

Even with the high-grade potion, the frostbite wasn’t healing well. This most likely wasn’t normal frostbite, but rather the backlash from using Ice Spiritification. This time, I hadn’t used a spell I’d borrowed, but rather my very own spiritification technique. As it turned out, the price to pay for such power wasn’t cheap.

Spider groaned. Even since he and Mathias had started glowering at one another, he hadn’t moved one inch. Or rather, he *couldn’t* move, I assumed. Mathias was a seasoned knight who’d emerged victorious on innumerable battlefields—a man as powerful as the revered Rank S adventurers. Even Barl had told me that Mathias was far stronger than he was. This was my very first time seeing Mathias on the battlefield, but a single look was enough to understand his power. Spider must have been searching for a way out, but even he could tell that the only thing that awaited him if he moved was death.

“Mathias Rhodostos,” Spider said. “This is unexpected. Who would have thought you’d leave the emperor’s side?”

“You’re the ringleader, aren’t you? I’ll make you regret daring to lay your hands upon His Majesty’s treasured subjects.”

Spider took a step back, unable to bear Mathias's bloodlust. At that moment, his right leg fell to the ground, neatly cut off. Mathias hadn't moved. His hand wasn't even on his sword!

No, that's not it. My eyes simply hadn't been able to follow his movements.

"Urgh!" Panic finally started to settle on Spider's face.

Mathias began slowly unsheathing his sword. Suddenly, Spider fired a large number of threads at him and took off running. He'd replaced his severed leg with a makeshift woven prosthesis. Before I could process what had happened, Mathias had swung his blade and put it back neatly in its scabbard.

As the sound of the hilt hitting the scabbard rang out, blood splattered. There was practically nothing left of Spider. I had no clue how it was possible to make someone vanish into a puddle of blood with just a sword, but one thing was certain: Spider was dead for good.

The jewel of death had been destroyed alongside Spider. Although I couldn't tell whether it was thanks to that or to Spider's death, the undead that had been wreaking havoc started disappearing.

"The criminal who attacked the capital is dead. Victory is ours!" Mathias declared.

Cries of triumph echoed around the square. As I watched Mathias walk away, I couldn't help but lose myself in thought. *Who was the young master Spider had mentioned? The leader of his organization, most likely. Spider had judged that I would be a danger to that master of his and had tried to eliminate me, but that was apparently against the master's wishes. Why was that?*

"I can't make sense of this," I whispered.

"What are you muttering to yourself about, Ellie? You should rest for now," Egret said.

I rested my head against his shoulder in an attempt to remain

upright, but I soon passed out.

◆

A few days after the attack, a man with the appearance of Lotton Flywok was on his knees, bowing low to a man who was casually sitting on a sofa. Behind him was Crow, who was lasciviously dressed in clothes made of an incredibly thin fabric.

“I took advantage of the confusion to have some of our people infiltrate the palace, the army, and the knights,” Phasmid said.

“Good. Spider truly did well. What about the other request I made to you?”

“I have it right here, young master.”

Phasmid took out a small vial and showed it to the man. Crow took it from him and passed it to their leader. Inside the vial was a bloodstained piece of fabric. The liquid it was soaking in shone with a pale glow.

“This is the blood of Ellie Leis’s adopted daughter, Alice Leis. I got my hands on it when she was attacked by a monster. As you can see, the mana contained within her blood is far denser than that of any human,” Phasmid explained.

“Then she must truly be…” Crow whispered.

“Indeed,” Phasmid confirmed. “Alice is the test subject who served as a catalyst for the mana crystal inside that fire drake.”

“But the experiments we conducted to create artificial spirits all failed, didn’t they?” Crow asked.

The man on the sofa brought his hand to his chin and closed his eyes, deep in thought.

“The only explanation I can think of is that she absorbed Ib’s mana and awakened,” he said.

“Is that even possible?” Crow asked.

“Who knows? Regardless, the fact is that an artificial spirit is out there, alive and kicking.”

Phasmid, who’d been silently listening to their exchange, spoke up once more. “Young master, I have something else to report.”

“Speak.”

“It’s about the nature of the mana of the artificial spirit.”

“The nature of her mana? What of it?”

“According to the documents I consulted, the artificial spirit used in the fire drake experiment was supposed to have fire attribute mana. However, Alice’s blood shows that her mana has two attributes: fire and water.”

“She has two attributes? How intriguing…” The corners of the man’s lips lifted in a satisfied smile.

◇

Ten days had passed since the horrific attack that had shaken the capital on the last day of the festival. I was currently in my residence reading through reports. After Egret had carried me home that day, I’d slept for three days and three nights straight.

Thankfully, I wouldn’t suffer any long-term sequelae, but my arm would require a few months to heal entirely. I’d been eager to get out of bed right after waking up, but Mireille had insisted I remain on complete bed rest. I’d told her that I felt fine, but after she’d brought Alice to see me, in tears and clutching Carol close to her chest, I’d resigned myself to my fate. In the end, I’d spent an entire week in bed.

“It looks like a lot happened while I was resting,” I said.

“Indeed. The uproar is still far from over,” Mireille replied.

It would still be a long time before order was fully restored in the capital. The authorities had yet to finish identifying all of the victims, and they were currently investigating the ruins in which

Spider had been hiding out prior to the attack, which they had just discovered. Apparently, they'd found a document proving that Friede had ordered the massacre. Soon, the empire would lodge a formal protest with the kingdom. Considering the scale of the attack, war was a likely outcome.

When I finished reading the report Mireille had brought me, I looked up at her. "Is everything this says true?" I asked.

"It is. The knights who investigated the ruins brought back that document."

"Is that so...?"

"Do you not believe this could have been Friede's doing, Miss Ellie?"

"Something feels off," I replied. "Spider was a member of an organization so secretive I'd never even so much as heard of it before the attack. How could he commit a blunder as amateur as leaving a crucial document with the name of their client in his hideout?"

"Well..."

"And there's the way they went about all of this," I added. "It's too perfect, especially since Friede *is* the ideal man to pin this on considering this is exactly the type of shortsighted idea he'd come up with."

"He's shown that time and time again," Mireille agreed. She was referring to the Sarjan conflict and the counterfeit money incident.

"But Friede isn't smart enough to think of using a jewel of death in a terrorist attack," I said. Jewels of death were powerful, but one had to be very knowledgeable about the records of the Old Kingdom to even learn about their existence.

"Then the document the knights found is a fake?"

"That's likely. Besides, Adel is in the palace. She must be keeping an eye on Friede. I doubt she'd let him approach and hire that

suspicious organization."

"You have a point," Mireille agreed.

"That's why I need you to look into this, Mireille. Someone else must be involved. Or perhaps that organization itself made the call."

"Understood; I will."

"There's something else I'd like to discuss," I said. I summoned my Grimoire of Beelzebub and cast a spell. "Silence." I didn't want anyone to overhear this.

"Miss Ellie?"

"What I'm about to tell you is top secret, Mireille."

Mireille nodded.

"Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant," I began, then continued after a pause, "is most likely our enemy."

"Mr. Flywok?! Why would you think that?! He protected Alice during the attack!"

"I'm aware. At that time, I was using Syncrosense. My goal was to keep track of the undead by looking through the eyes of my saint birds, but I was also able to see through Carol's eyes."

"What did you see?"

"Lotton took a sample of Alice's blood. I don't know why he did that, but considering the circumstances under which we found Alice, that is very suspicious. It's even possible that Lotton and Spider worked together to create a commotion so he could get to Alice."

"No way!"

"Alice has two mana attributes, water and fire. He might have targeted her because he knew that. Or perhaps he has his eyes on

her because he knows she emerged from the corpse of a fire drake. I don't understand his motives, but it is imperative that we be wary of him moving forward."

"All right."

"I'd like you to investigate him too, but be as careful as possible. We're dealing with the Clairvoyant, after all."

"Got it, miss."

◆

At the very heart of the Kingdom of Haldoria, in the palace, was a heavily guarded area where Adel had decided to set up her office. After signing a few documents, she stretched like a cat.

"Mistress Adel! That is unbecoming of a princess!"

"Oh, who cares? No one's watching anyway!"

"I'm watching!" The exasperated young woman complaining was Maoran. The ever-serious waiting maid frowning at her mistress was a common sight in this room.

"Do you think Eiwass is doing a good job?" Adel asked.

"Who knows?" Maoran replied. "I can't read that man."

"He *is* hard to read. But he's also very competent. I need him, so I'm keeping him next to me, but never lower your guard around him," Adel warned.

"I won't."

"Roselia's with him, so he can't mess up too badly. Although I imagine Roselia is having a terrible time."

"That's likely. When they return, you must remember to show her appreciation for her efforts."

"You're right. By the way..." Adel stopped for a moment to drink

a mouthful of tea before finishing, “how is my brother doing?”

“According to the reports, he’s still completing his work seriously. The guards say he barely ever leaves his living quarters. Lady Sylvia, on the other hand, seems to have finally understood her own situation. They say she’s on edge these days. Well, it’s not like there’s anything much she can do anyway.”

“Still, I’m surprised. I thought she’d come and try her luck with me.”

“Indeed, she hasn’t tried to approach you at all,” Maoran said. “Oh, it looks like it’s time, mistress.”

“Got it. Let’s go, then.”

Adel was scheduled to meet with several nobles today. She planned to bring the decent ones to her side, little by little.

◇

“Miss Ellie, I’m done summarizing our firm’s damage and casualty reports.”

“Thank you, Lunoa.” I took a look at the document she’d just handed me. “Sadly, some of our employees lost their lives in Spider’s attack...”

“Lunoa, could you go to the financial department and ask them to send condolence money to the bereaved families?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Misha, you go to the human resources department and ask them to start preparing to fill these open positions.”

“Yes, Miss Ellie.”

Lunoa and Misha had just left my office when Mireille walked in with a cup of coffee for me.

“There ended up being more casualties than during the king

poison slime incident," she said.

"That's true," I replied. "Although I suppose that was to be expected with undead monsters rampaging in the center of the city during the festival. There were even several high-level monsters." I picked up a biscuit and took a bite to offset the bitterness of my drink. "So, tell me, Mireille. Have you been able to find out any information about Spider's mysterious organization?"

"No, not yet. I put Barl on the case, but he has yet to uncover anything. Apparently, there were no traces left whatsoever—except for the document that incriminated Friede."

"How troublesome," I said with a sigh. "What do the imperial authorities think?"

"At first, they appeared to be skeptical too. They thought the document found in Spider's hideout may have been a fake left there on purpose. But according to what I've heard, the more they investigate, the more evidence they seem to find. In addition, many nobles are utterly convinced Haldoria is to blame because the Haldorian delegation changed its plans without prior notice and departed before the attack. The imperial family is trying to remain cautious, but those who call for war are gaining more and more traction."

"My brother and Roselia colluding with Friede? That's unthinkable."

"The nobles of the empire treat the Haldorian nobility as a monolith. And they're not necessarily wrong to assume that. Many nobles publicly act like they're on bad terms with one another while conducting secret deals behind closed doors."

"Roselia and the others truly picked the worst time to leave."

"But isn't this a good opportunity for you?" Mireille asked. "If we fan the flames, there's a good chance a war will break out. This would differ a lot from your original plan, but you could rely on the empire's military strength this way."

In the past, I would have wholeheartedly agreed with Mireille. Manipulating the prices of strategic resources now would drastically increase the likelihood of a war. And if I got close to the warmongering nobles while this was happening, I could push for war *and* secure a spot for myself as a supplier of the army.

"I can't do that," I replied.

"Why not?" Mireille asked.

"If a war breaks out, the people will be hurt. My contract with Roselia prevents me from deliberately choosing to harm the masses."

"A contract? With Lady Roselia?! When in the world did you—"

"I'll explain the details later," I told her. "But what matters is that from now on, any plan should exclusively target the royal family or nobles, not the common people."

While I couldn't push for war, if one started without any meddling from me, I would still be free to join it on the empire's side. That was one of the tricky things about magic contracts. Actively breaking the terms of the contract was not an option, but doing so passively was perfectly acceptable and wouldn't be counted as a violation.

"I took on bothersome limitations, but so did the other side," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Roselia is just too soft. That's why she easily forgets about some things. A contract does not only bind one party. It binds two." I smirked.

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"The names of dozens of citizens of the empire are carved into the cenotaph that stands in the Central Square. However, the events that led to the construction of this monument are still

unknown. Once every five years, during the parade that opens the festival, the imperial family offers a prayer at the cenotaph. This tradition has led many to believe that the truth behind the cenotaph is passed down through the imperial family. If one dives into the history of the period during which the memorial was erected, one will discover that this period matches with the sudden deterioration of the relationship between the Yutear Empire and the Kingdom of Haldoria (currently the Dukedom of Haldoria). As a result, many surmise that some violent incident involving the two nations may have taken place at the time."

"Phew." Linda reread through her manuscript one more time before stretching. She'd been forced to stay overnight at the company, but she'd made her deadline.

Linda had just finished writing the very first installment of her series dealing with the historical mysteries of the empire. This was the first time Linda had gotten to work on a project she'd pitched and launched from the very start, so she absolutely wanted it to succeed.

"All right. Now, time to figure out my investigation schedule for next month's story..."

— A scene at the editing department of Empire Publishers, late at night.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, new readers. It's been a while, old readers. I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for purchasing this fifth volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

After much discussion with my editor, from this volume onward I've decided to make significant changes to the story I'd initially written in the web novel. If I continued to follow the original storyline, this series would reach its end in another volume or two. However, thanks to the considerable support you've shown me, I've been given the chance to continue it further. I'm overjoyed to be able to write about the many unexploited ideas I've had in mind for Ellie and her companions.

While this story is a little atypical, I was finally able to include two staples of fantasy stories—a martial arts tournament and a festival. On top of that, Alice found herself an adorable little mascot. At the very start, I meant for Carol to be a tiny dragon, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, but I eventually settled on a fluffy carbuncle. I knew I'd made the right choice when I received masami-sama's wonderful illustration.

On a different note, I'd like to fill you in on a rather big change in my life. The truth is that I've recently changed jobs. For many reasons, I wasn't able to continue at my previous job. At that time, I applied for unemployment benefits through Hello Work, but since my income from my writing side gig was extremely irregular and unstable, I ended up causing a lot of trouble for the staff. Thankfully, I was able to find another job after around two months. Then, another issue arose. Since I'd been lazing around at home during that period of unemployment, I wasn't able to handle the hot September weather when I finally went back to work. I suffered from heatstroke and was sent to the hospital. As I'm writing these words, temperatures have long since cooled and gone from refreshing to outright cold, but I'm already anxious about summer returning in a few months. Please always take good care of your

health and remain cautious.

Anyhow, allow me to move on to the acknowledgments.

First of all, I'd like to thank my dear illustrator, masami-sama. I'm always in awe of the cool and adorable art I receive! Some characters have become more prominent in the story because their designs were so good that I just had to give them more attention. Even *I* was surprised by this development!

I'm also very grateful to Oonoimo-sama for adapting *Livid Lady* into a manga. Thanks to Oonoimo-sama's work bringing out the charms of Ellie and the other characters tenfold, many people have come to know my original work, and I'm incredibly thankful for that.

As always, I'd like to thank S-sama, my editor. Thank you for always helping me brainstorm and pointing me in the right direction when I'm not sure how to write something. Thanks to you, *Livid Lady* has become a work that I, too, can enjoy, and one that I certainly couldn't have produced alone.

I'm also beyond thankful to everyone who was involved in the process of publishing this volume. I'm starting to run out of ways to describe how mind-blowing their efforts are. I need to start thinking of new ones, but that will be a challenge for future me.

Last but not least, thank you, my dear readers. It's only thanks to your support that I get to indulge in such luxurious worries!

From the bottom of my heart, thank you!